

JAMES AGATE

THE
CONTEMPORARY
THEATRE

1944 AND 1945



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TO
A. V. COOKMAN

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PREFACE

THIS book is a week-by-week survey of the London commercial theatre during the years 1944 and 1945. The last five articles, containing an examination of the working conditions of that theatre, are the real preface to this book.

J. A.

July 1, 1946

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Theatre versus Cinema

THE B.B.C. announces in connection with a series entitled "Life and the Theatre" plays by Afinogenov, Ibsen, Quintero, Shakespeare, Maeterlinck, and Ben Jonson. These plays are to illustrate weekly talks about "comedy and tragedy; the reality and the symbol; the poetry of the theatre; plays with a message; the theatre versus the cinema . . . a series that will endeavour to probe the very roots of dramatic art in its relation to real life." I propose to be an absorbed and spell-bound listener. In the meantime there is one item in the series—the last one—about which I should like to say a trifling, foolish word.

I remember in the pre-war days being driven past the Palace Theatre and the chauffeur asking whether *The Way of a Hero*, or some such name, was a play or a picture. I said, "Does it matter?" He said, "If it's a picture I should like to see it." "Not if it's a play?" I queried. He said, "No, sir; I don't care for plays. Films are more *real*." Nothing about being able to see or hear better, the more comfortable seating, the cheaper admission. The whole point was that to this young man shadow was more alive than substance. This struck a chord somewhere, and when I got home I spent an hour going through my books. Something drew me to my Stevensons, and impelled me to take down *The Wrecker*. And here, conveniently shortened, is the passage I was looking for:

I believe, if things had gone smooth with me, I should be now fallen in mind to a thing perhaps as low as many types of *bourgeois*—the implicit or exclusive artist. I have often marvelled at the impudence of gentlemen who describe and pass judgment on the life of man, in almost perfect ignorance of all its necessary elements and natural careers. Those who dwell in clubs and studios may paint excellent pictures or write enchanting novels. There is one thing they should not do: they should pass no judgment on man's destiny, for it is a thing with which they are

unacquainted. Their own life is an excrescence of the moment, doomed, in the vicissitude of history, to pass and disappear. The eternal life of man, spent under sun and rain and in rude physical effort, lies upon one side, scarce changed since the beginning.

But of course! Stevenson had some of Mr Dick's capacity for setting us right. Now I saw that the man who can fly a plane is nearer to life than the writer who sits back and concocts pretty stuff about wings glinting in the sun. In a flash I saw why, to the young chauffeur and his kind, celluloid is more "real" than flesh and blood. He wants recognizable fact, and not to be put off by that art which to him is falsification. The groundlings in Shakespeare's day? They were clods whom the spirit of democracy had not yet taught to resent what their betters had to show them. Sophisticates sitting at a play accept the fact that this is not the "real" Hamlet, but Hamlet at two removes—Shakespeare's dramatic invention and poetic fire, and, say, Mr Gielgud's talent for miming and verse-speaking. Sitting at the pictures these sophisticates pleasurably realize that what they are looking at is not reality, but what is left after the director, the camera-man and the film actor have had their way with it. Now your simpleton is not concerned with these niceties of adjustment. To him a play is mere play-acting. He doesn't believe that Romeo has really taken poison or Juliet stabbed herself; he knows that presently the pair will get off the floor and bow their acknowledgments. And that if it is a first-night, Romeo will come forward and make a speech thanking his backers, the audience, and the staff back-stage including the stage cat. Whereas at the film he has the very strong impression that the thing is really happening, that Scarface really does shoot the rat who has betrayed his sister. Cornered, he will agree that he is looking at Paul Muni and George Raft. But he will not be conscious of this throughout the performance, nor will these actors remind him of it at the end.

What follows? I think this. On the one hand the theatre should on no account attempt to fight the cinema on the cinema's ground; the recent stage production of *War and Peace* disconcerted playgoers and failed to bring over any of the other kind. On the other

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hand, I hold that the film's frenzied attempts to discover itself as an art-form must undermine its authenticity with those who regard it as the mouthpiece of reality. That ingenious director who pretends to depict moral declivity by photographing a character slant-wise, like Little Tich bowing over his boots, should be invited to realize that to the simple any deviation from the perpendicular merely means the cock-eyed, and that what enchants Chelsea can only confuse Camden Town. To sum up, I believe that the ways of theatre and cinema lie apart—leaving the coterie film out of consideration—and that prosperity for both lies in that divergence being respected. You might put it that whereas to the sophisticated mind art is an interpretation, to the simple it is a betrayal. Or even that the few of us who are theatregoers are content that Macbeth should spill his mind about murder, whereas the many of us who are filmgoers demand that he shall “get on with it.” Is it practical politics to attempt to cultivate an art-sense in your shop-boy or shop-girl? No. They go to the pictures to hold hands and see life as they imagine it is lived by people with money.

January 2, 1944

Concerning the Great Actor

No man in his senses would say, "I prefer margarine to butter; therefore margarine is butter." Yet I know several highly distinguished writers about the theatre whose arguments boil down to "We prefer team-acting to the starring of great actors. Therefore team-actors are great actors." I have never denied that some of the old acting would seem ridiculous to us now. My point has always been that if the old actors were alive to-day they would modify their methods to suit modern taste. But here is a point I enunciate for the first time. This is that the old acting was an affair of temperament and passion which demanded and got the critic of temperament and passion. The cold-blooded intellectual critic came in with the unimpassioned intellectual actor; neither has any feeling for the old theatre. This kind of critic would bring the grandeur of the old actor into relation with the simplicity of the old audience, on the lines of Charles II's remark about the popular preacher: "I suppose his nonsense suits their nonsense." I will never agree.

Now let me deal with something else. I hold that Shakespeare wrote for the great actor and with this in view conceived his six major tragedies as three solo pieces and three duos.

Hamlet. Solo. Why does Shakespeare fail to explore the character of the Queen? Because if he had, the play about Gertrude must have overtopped the play about Hamlet, and Shakespeare knew this, just as we know which play Ibsen would have preferred. How do we know? Because in *Ghosts* the real centre of the drama is not Oswald but the relations between Mrs Alving and the Captain. Because if Ibsen had written *Hamlet* the play would have centred in Gertrude, her husband, and her lover. Whereas Shakespeare had no intention of letting Hamlet be relegated to Oswald's plane.

Macbeth. Duo. Sir A. Quiller-Couch makes the point that

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Shakespeare, in order to throw the Macbeths into high relief, deliberately flattens every other character, with the possible exception of Banquo. And we remember Bradley saying about the Macduffs, "Neither they, nor Duncan, nor Malcolm, nor even Banquo himself, have been imagined intensely."

King Lear. Solo. All that matters is Lear's mind, the plot serving merely to set that mind working, and the sub-plot to fill in when that mind is resting.

Othello. Solo. With obbligato by Iago and occasional flute-cadenzas by Desdemona.

Romeo and Juliet. Duo. Why is Mercutio killed off so early in the play? Because Shakespeare senses that he is becoming a more vital character than his hero.

Antony and Cleopatra. Duo. The rest are shadows.

In the old days you had the chief part or parts grandly played by one or two great players, and the rest scrambled through somehow. (That some of the lesser characters are worth better treatment is due to the overflow from their author's excessive genius.) Personally—and I can only hope the reader will not be too greatly shocked—I cannot believe that such scrambling greatly mattered. When there is a whirlwind about and genius riding it, who cares about the minor eddies? To-day, when there are no whirlwind actors, compensation of a kind is sought and alleged to be found in the careful scrutiny of the eddies. At this point, I can hear some reader asking, "Why can't we have both? Why not the chief parts played in the grand manner with justice done to the lesser rôles?" The answer is to be found in a couplet of Pope:

Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see,
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.

And then there is the human element to be concerned. Your great actor was a megalomaniac. You were not asked to take him or leave him; you were to take him and leave the rest! Here I come upon what to some will be debatable ground. I feel, and feel strongly, that Shakespeare would have preferred to see his *Macbeth* rendered by a great pair supported by a rabble of nincompoops than by a couple of thoughtful nonentities reinforced by a company in which

Lennox was nicely distinguished from Angus and Caithness from Menteith. "Le Théâtre c'est moi" was the great actor's motto. I agree, and I feel that Shakespeare would have agreed. He knew that what the public came to see was not Horatio and not Hamlet, but the actor who played Hamlet.

Now let me turn the picture round. I admit that your great actor would be worse than useless in the dramas of Ibsen, Tchekov, or Shaw—in a word, the modern school. Confront a player of Irving's calibre with Ibsen's quandary in the matter of municipal bath-water, Tchekov's sale of a few trees, or Mr Shaw's preoccupation with a flower-girl's accent, and he will object that there is nothing for him to do here, meaning that an actor of lesser virtuosity will do the job better. Turning up Walkley, I find a passage in the essay on Cabotinage which seems to me to be extremely appropriate:

Our actors to-day are university graduates, men about town, wits, exquisites, professors; never mummers. In fact, you would never take them for actors at all, except when they are acting—and not always then. I suppose it is the new education. They all come from the O.U.D.S. or the A.D.C. or Girton or the A.D.A. (unless they come, as they mostly seem to be doing just now, from the U.S.A.). Or else it is the *Zeitgeist*. The spirit of the age sets its face against flamboyancy, and mumming was nothing if not flamboyant. I am not sure that the world has gained by the change. With the defect we have also lost the quality. If the pit no longer "rises at" great actors, one reason may be that there are no longer great actors to rise at.

The conclusion of the matter? That in magnoperative days the producer was unwanted, whereas in minoperative times he or she is all-important. Nevertheless, I should like to have seen Kean's face if, after Richard's death-scene of "preternatural and terrific grandeur," some meek, bald, bespectacled little man had trotted on to the stage to be thanked for his scrupulous and imaginative direction. And Irving's if, after French Louis's shattering collapse, some bright-eyed lady had come forward to bow her acknowledgments.

January 9, 1944

More about the Great Actor

HAVING hit the nail on the head, now comes the less exciting job of driving it home. But first I am to confess a slip of the hammer last week—the fact that just as somebody forgot Goschen, so, in my reference to *Antony and Cleopatra*, I forgot that considerable character Enobarbus. And now to finish the job.

Did the old actor look on any and every play, masterpiece and fustian, as an ocean of nothingness lapping his island majesty? Yes. Does the modern team-actor look upon himself as a ripple in some placid, eventless lake? Yes. I want in this second and concluding article to deal with the possibility of combining ocean and inland sea, substituting for the self-centred island a high-souled mountain condescending to an unsnubbable plain. Geographically this is nonsense; say the difference between the old-fashioned cotton lord to whom the operatives touched their caps and to-day's managing director of a profit-sharing concern. But to go back to my landscape. It seems to me that the mountain and not the plain is the difficulty. In the past these natural volcanoes came about through temperament working on egomania. Upon what lava, heated by what fire, are we to look to-day to raise one team-actor above another? The team-spirit? Surely not. That would be a contradiction in terms. Let me take an illustration from a sister art. It is, I believe, generally conceded that quartet players are not solo players suddenly seized with abnegatory passion for dispensing with three-fourths of their personal glory. Conversely—I pen this under correction—I do not imagine that a long course of quartet playing is the best preparation for the solo job. It is a modern fashion to deride your virtuoso by calling him a circus horse. Be it so; at least he is an animal who has had enough sense to learn his tricks in a school for circus horses. Now apply this to acting. And acting in this country, since it has been sufficiently dinned into me how, at the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavsky would play Hamlet one evening and Marcellus the next. I agree

that in Russia they are all natural actors, and that any Russian Marcellus can put up a Hamlet as moody as the average British Dane. But we are not a race of natural actors; in this country your player is a manufactured article, and the problem of turning artificial molehills into cloud-capped mountains is not an easy one.

In Mr Sacheverell Sitwell's newly published *Splendours and Miseries* there is a reproduction of Fuseli's painting of Mrs Siddons as Lady Macbeth, and I suggest that readers who want to learn about great acting should have a look at this. It would seem that Fuseli saw what Hazlitt saw—a figure “little less appalling in its effect than the apparition of a preternatural being.” Fuseli paints the Siddons laying a choppy finger upon a skinny lip; this and the foggy draperies suggest that the witches have passed into the body of the murderess and possessed her soul. In the background her spouse returns holding the daggers in front of him; he drips with terror and looks for comfort to his unwavering and, in the literal sense, better half. Does anybody expect to see all *that* rising above repertory's level floor? I for one do not. I do not hold with that school of criticism which insists that Fuseli's excitement, like that of Hazlitt, proceeded out of a fashion of the times, “the delight in being struck all of a blubbering heap.” Mr Sitwell has a chapter about Madeleine Smith, who put, or didn't put, something into her lover's cup of cocoa, and, a Scots jury being unable to determine who caused the young man's death, passed into history revealing her famous shirt blouse and sailor hat. I suggest that this and not *Macbeth* is repertory stuff. Title? *The Poisoned Tassie*.

Let me now sum up the arguments of the last fortnight. (1) Every great British actor *ipso facto* bursts the play he is in to smithereens. (2) The team-dramas of Ibsen, Tchekhov, Shaw, Jean-Jacques Bernard, Priestley and the like call for team-acting and would be ruined by the presence of a great actor, English style. (3) That Shakespearean tag about how, when a great actor leaves the stage, nobody cares tuppence for the next fellow, held good until the 13th of October, 1905. For on that date Henry Irving, the last of the great English actors, died; Galsworthy had just started to write *The Silver Box*, Miss Horniman was taking up the reins of repertory management at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, and the new school

MORE ABOUT THE GREAT ACTOR

of acting was preparing to raise its banner with "Much of a Muchness" for its strange device. (4) Great acting and team-acting are two good things as different as chalk and cheese. (5) To argue that because a piece of chalk makes legible marks on a blackboard it must be a piece of ripe Stilton, argues a poor knowledge of both substances. (6) The *ideal* performance of a great tragedy—all comedy demands the team-spirit—can only come from a fusion of the two schools. "But 'ow?" as Mrs May used to ask in the late lamented Fred Emney's famous sketch. Where is the great actor to come from? Will he ever see himself as part of a whole? Here are two problems for the future. In the meantime I pity the poor director, as we are beginning to call the producer. He is indeed between two fires. He knows that the great actor has no use for him, and equally that without him, the director, the team-actor is useless.

January 16, 1944

Thank You, Mr Bridie!

NORMALLY I fight shy of semi-limp packages too thick for a letter and too thin for a book. There is always the danger that they may contain a pamphlet; and if there is one thing this citizen hates and despises, as Damon Runyon would say, it is a pamphlet, whether it be a plea for a better understanding of the Manx, an essay on Basic English by some one who hasn't mastered the other sort, or No. 17 in the Hints to Young Men Series: When and Where to Carry a Comb. A fortunate keek revealing the words "Proceedings of the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow" emboldened me the other day to refish the Thing out of the W.P.B. into which I had too hastily flung it. It turned out to be a Lecture on Modern Dramatic Art delivered some twelve months ago. Now I am not one of those who believe that something is of no interest because it was not given to the world yesterday. A further glance showed that the author of the lecture was Mr James Bridie, a dramatist who, like Shakespeare, writes his best plays when somebody else provides him with the plot. Or is this a personal view? I feel that *Tobias and the Angel* and *Jonah and the Whale* are worth a wilderness of sleeping clergymen and Mr Bolfrys. Left to himself Mr Bridie at once becomes the direct opposite of the old lady who won David Copperfield's caul, the old girl who said, "Let us have no meandering." The Menander of the old stage becomes the Meander of the new. Now this is odd, since Mr Bridie is a Scot, and meandering is the last quality one would expect, that is, if one takes one's notions of a Scotsman from Charles Lamb. "You are never admitted to see his ideas in their growth," said Elia. Whereas Mr Bridie is always too busy with his next idea to give you more than the early shoots of his first. "You never catch his mind in an undress." But I have never caught Mr Bridie's mind in anything else. "He always keeps the path. You cannot make excursions with him—for he sets you right." But Mr Bridie never keeps the path. He is always making excursions, and it is his critics who have to set

him right. And lo and behold, this lecture proceeds to justify Lamb and give the lie to everything I have previously thought about Mr Bridie. Or at least the first half of it does.

Now let us see where our mentor leads us. Mr Bridie lays it down that the stage, instead of reproducing what is going on in the world around it, has always tended, and still tends, to insulate itself against contemporary life. He denies that the Elizabethan drama was the mirror of its age. He tells us of the discoveries of Humphrey Gilbert, Harvey, Tycho Brahe and Kepler, and then asks what Shakespeare's plays were about. The answer is, "A negro general who strangled his wife; an aristocratic psychopath with a mother-fixation; a series of young ladies who dressed up as men; a series of cads, politicians, and murderers masquerading as kings; and a delightful rogues' gallery of drunkards, bullies, thieves, whoremongers, and Bright Young Things." Let it not be thought that Mr Bridie lacks a just and correct view of Shakespeare. He tells us that *Macbeth*, showing what happens to assailants of the Divine Right of Kings, was a piece of toadying undertaken to please King James, and that the refurbished play of *King Lear* was intended to go one better. Though majesty was shown in ruins, there was to be in the person of Kent a true-blue Briton ready to stick by royalty through thick and thin. In Mr Bridie's opinion the new play wasn't as good as the old, but he adds that at least Shakespeare created Lear. "The foolish, arrogant old idiot, destitute of any decent human quality and incapable of any reasonable act, began to open his mouth and speak with a voice that had not been heard since the Book of Job, arraigning the Creator of Mankind." Good for Bridie, and good too for Shakespeare!

The argument proceeds something like this. Plays are not, and never have been, what that very good dramatic critic, Hamlet, held that they ought to be. Instead of being ideal compositions reflecting the times they have been a compromise, or a victory for some outside influence, body or person. The person may have been an actor, in which case he will be a great actor like Garrick or Irving. "The result of Garrick's victory was the temporary sterilization of the English theatre." In Mr Bridie's view, this was also the result of Irving's victory. But now comes something from which I really

must dissent. This is the statement that "It was because of that victory that two extremely talented men were, in 1890, writing extremely bad plays." The playwrights in question were Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero, and what Mr Bridie really means can only be that their extremely good plays are not, and would not have been, his cup of tea. Getting on for fifty years ago Mr Shaw hailed Jones as a born dramatist whose plays grew and were not stuck together. "Invent a mechanical rabbit," said G. B. S., "and I am merely entertained. Produce a real rabbit which runs around the room without being wound up at all, I simply ask, Why shouldn't it? and take down my gun." (I quote from memory.) Mr Shaw riddled the ideas behind Jones's *Michael and his Lost Angel*, and let daylight into the intellectual content of *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*. But he never made the mistake of saying that Jones and Pinero wrote bad plays.

The second half of the lecture returns, alas, to meandering in the old way, in the sense that it doesn't get the reader anywhere in particular. Unless it be the statement that before a play can attain production it must, so to speak, conciliate "the leading man, the leading lady, the producer, the impresario, the press agent, the stage director, the scene designer, the backer, and the thousands or hundreds of others who have to express their personalities before the perfect chrysolite appears." This may be the compromise alluded to in the early part of the lecture; it cannot have anything to do with the victory of the great actor, who, it is now sufficiently established, no longer exists. The future? Mr Bridie "leaves the question in obscurity," as Dr Johnson, to Boswell's regret, left the details of the next world. In what Max has called "the great pale platitude of the meantime" it only remains to thank Mr Bridie for half an hour of delightful and witty instruction.

January 23, 1944

The Case for Discursiveness

THE CRADLE SONG. (Revival.) By G. Martinez Sierra, adapted by
John Garrett Underhill

Apollo

THE DRUID'S REST. By Emlyn Williams
St Martin's

WHAT is it, asked Walkley, that gives Dryden's criticism its peculiar charm? He found the answer in "the little descriptive embellishments." A point Walkley did *not* make was the possibility of discursiveness being something more than ornament. A cloak, for example. A way of saying nothing. Take nuns. I am the last person to write about nuns or pronounce on a play about them. I can more readily see myself as contortionist or lion-tamer than mewed-up recluse. I belong to the breed of Dumas's Fouquet, whom Stevenson called "the waster, the lover of good cheer and wit and art, the swift transactor of much business." I see myself, in Dumas's own words, "l'homme de bruit, l'homme de plaisir, l'homme qui n'est que parceque les autres sont." What can one seeing himself so have to say to nuns?

Confront me with a play like *The Cradle Song* and I am tempted to take a leaf out of Dryden and hark back to *Primerose*, that sentimentality with which, during the last war, the Comédie Française, attracted young soldiers on leave. The piece was all about a pure girl who turned down a young man because he had money, and went into a convent. Whereupon her would-be swain went off to South America, and, coming back with a story about having lost his money, renewed his suit and was accepted. Fortunately, being a novice, Primerose had not cut off her hair, and there was a touching moment at the wedding-breakfast when the bridegroom announced that far from losing his fortune in Peruvian bark he had in fact doubled it. An elaboration of this, and a playful glance at Shakespeare's *Isabella* with some toying with the notion that Angelo would have been better punished if he had been forced

to marry the prude instead of the wilting Mariana—and there was my article.

But on this occasion, and with the theatre in its present state, my conscience will not let me off so lightly. I have the suspicion that Sierra's piece is the most beautiful thing produced in London since *A Month in the Country*, and that it would be unpardonable not to say so. It is exquisitely acted by a cast keeping perfect balance between frustration and breathless devotion. Miss Lilly Kann's Mother Prioress might have sat for Rembrandt; there is something here that is utterly satisfying. Miss Muriel Aked, as the Mother Vicar whose tartness redeems the play from possibility of mawkishness, has a surprising moment of genuine emotion at the end. Miss Wendy Hiller knows all about the starved Sister Juana, but I wish her peasant inflections—"I don't want yer ter think thet I'm angree with yer"—didn't sound quite so much like the modern crooner. Miss Yvonne Mitchell and Mr Julian Dallas play the lovers prettily, though their scene together is too long; and as the old doctor, Mr Frederick Leister does not deviate by a hair's breadth from the path of perfection he marked out for himself at the beginning of his career. Last, Mr Gielgud's production is faultless.

Is it argued that nobody born outside the Principality can appreciate the quality of Mr Williams's play? Here, with or without the reader's leave, I shall divagate to the extent of telling the following true story: A young English lawyer, setting up in business in South Wales, had a farmer for his first client. The farmer's case was that, driving along a steep embankment, he saw a motor-car approaching; that he got down, went to the animal's head, and signalled the motorist to stop, shouting, "Be careful now, my mare, she is very nervous," that the motorist disregarded the warning and dashed past, whereupon the frightened mare went over the embankment and was impaled upon some stakes. In due course the case came on for trial, and the farmer, going into the witness-box, deposed as follows: "I said, 'Come on now. My mare is very sensible, look you!'" And lost his case, saying to the indignant solicitor, "But it was the truth, and telling the truth has never hurt anybody!" I find no difficulty in the foregoing. It seems to me to be a perfect example of Welsh character putting, in the words of an eminent

colleague, "the truth of its own imagination higher than other, more easily recognized forms of truth." I see no more in the farmer's first statement than the highly coloured protest of the lover of horses against the clattering motor-car. And in the second statement I see Welsh recognition of the fact that in the land of their fathers, as elsewhere, bedrock is bedrock, however much it may be obscured by the mists of self-deception.

Therefore let us have no nonsense about the necessity of being Welsh before one can perceive the merits or demerits of Mr Emlyn Williams's entertainment. What we undeniably get is less a play than a number of amusing sketches of Welsh character and a less amusing imbroglio in which an Eisteddfod is mixed up with a masquerading peer, who, assuming the name of Smith, is mistaken for a famous murderer. My story of the Welsh farmer suggests, to me, that whereas Song is the eternal expression of the human soul we must consider Murder as an occasional aberration and keep things in their right proportion. If this is not Mr Williams's meaning, I drool. The acting honours were divided equally between Mr Roddy Hughes, who is a player of resource and accomplishment, and Master Brynmor Thomas, a fourteen-year-old making a successful first appearance as the result, one guesses, of some strict dragooning. In the one English-speaking part Mr Michael Shepley explored the heights of the British peerage with the aplomb and confidence of a tight-rope walker practising in his own gymnasium.

January 30, 1944

A Postscript

THE past week having proved minoperative, I propose to add a postscript to something recently said in these columns. The reader may ask why the postscript was not incorporated in the article. The answer is sheer excitement, the same sort of excitement which robbed Georges Carpentier of the victory he so nearly won over Jack Dempsey. Those who have studied the science of golf as distinct from the practice of that game will recollect being told that a ball which is played by a master using the correct amount of follow-through will leave a large imprint on the club head, whereas a ball which is hit by a duffer makes a mark only half the size. The reason, of course, is that the correctly hit ball remains longer in contact with the striking face than the ball that is merely clouted. Now apply this to boxing. I am told that the genuine knock-out depends very largely on the follow-through, this being your screw-driver's half-turn of the wrist at the moment of impact. I understand that that great boxer, Georges Carpentier, has spent a lifetime regretting that in the excitement of contacting with Dempsey's chin he forgot the half-turn. And that Dempsey has confessed that he owed his retention of the championship to this remissness on the Frenchman's part.

And now to connect all this with my argument. Idly turning the pages of an old book the other day—I should perhaps confess that it was one of my own—I came across a criticism of Talma's Hamlet which seemed to clinch once and for all this question of what is and what is not a great actor. How I came to overlook this passage—with which I must obviously be familiar—I know not, unless it be for the same reason which made Carpentier forget the double punch. It is culled from the *London Magazine* for 1822:

To men who court a familiarity with terror he offers at every moment new materials for astonishment and pleasure, and they

gaze upon his terrible delineations in mute and marvelling delight. The cavern of a magician is not more silent than the theatre when this great enchanter awakens the furies and calls up the passions from their dark abysses in the human heart. His delivery of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy was at once solemn and abrupt. The pauses were long, but the utterance was sudden and occasionally precipitate. There was earnestness and an impatient curiosity in his investigations of the mysteries of the grave, which he seemed to open and search like one looking for its secrets, like a treasure, in its dark and impenetrable depth. Yet there was no loss of dignity in this impassioned scrutiny. He was more swift than hurried. His images appeared to pass, like the shadows of rapid clouds, over an elevated mind. He seemed to spring with one bound over the dark borders which separate us from futurity, and to traverse vast tracts of meditation in a single thought. It was not exactly consistent with our own notions of Hamlet, but it was a noble portraiture of a man holding discourse with death; and, to use an expression of Madame de Staël, "*interrogant la pensée sur le sort des mortels.*"

Does this, or does this not, settle the matter? If not, I shall drive the thing home in the manner Carpentier forgot with a quotation from a recent article by an esteemed colleague who holds my views on acting:

There are occasions in the theatre which bring sharply to mind Stendhal's dislike of professional accomplishment in acting and give unwelcome force to his dictum that some plays are best performed by well-bred amateurs in a barn. The recollection is unwelcome, for Stendhal was not a good playgoer, and what he resented—the intrusion of a dominating personality between him and the poetry—is precisely what good playgoers always hope to encounter.

Well, there you have it—the choice between the great actor, absorbing the dramatist's poetry and giving it out again through the medium of his dominating personality, and the team-actor, to be rated, in my view, perhaps a little higher than Stendhal's

amateur in a barn. And there, as far as I am concerned, the matter ends. I shall not reopen it until some London critic, diligently going the rounds of all the repertory theatres between Berwick-on-Tweed and the Lizard, can discover a team-actor about whom he can honestly say anything approaching what the critic of the *London Magazine* deemed it proper to say about Talma one hundred and more years ago.

"Yebbut," as the little boy said, a lot of water has flowed beneath the bridges since the Follies first ravished London. Their fame quickly spread to the provinces, and the following year the late C. E. Montague paid one of his rare visits to London. The theatrical season was in full swing. The Lyceum, St James's, and Court theatres were magnoperating, and in the way of foreign visitors Réjane was displaying the essence of Parisian *chic*, Bernhardt was perforating Byzantine tyrants with hat-pins, while Duse nobly caorted. It was estimated that our great critic would be able in the course of a week-end to attend two evening performances and one matinée. Asked on his return what plays he had seen, Montague replied, "I went to the Follies—twice!" I am afraid that once would be a sufficient vigil at *The Gay Follies* (Cambridge Theatre). The artists are, I think, not to blame, since there is evidence of talent. But the show belongs to an earlier and less sophisticated day, the day when the notion of a number of pierrots and pierrettes turning round to exhibit placards spelling the name of a famous General would have been considered a more than brilliant idea. Mr Billy Revell is reasonably amusing as a decrepit monarch in a skit on musical comedy, Mr Jack Mayer shows a certain amount of presence, Mr Morris Harvey gives faithful imitations of actors most of whom the audience has never seen, and Mr Nat D. Ayer plays a number of old songs which should be built up to a finale and are not. But the material essential to a success is just not there.

February 6, 1944

“Hamlet”

HAMLET. By William Shakespeare
New

WAS Shakespeare a good dramatist? Is *Hamlet* a good play? Has the text been treated with reasonable respect? Is Mr Robert Helpmann's acting what we should expect from an accomplished master of mime who has discarded his principal asset? Has Mr Guthrie produced with good accent and good discretion? The answer, with reservations, is in the affirmative. This revival is, in intention, so much above the ruck of current war production that I shall give myself the pleasure of writing about it in two parts, and for the further reason that no Hamlet can be judged without reference to his predecessors. "Nothing remarkable happened to me in 1874," wrote Sala in his autobiography. Yet that was the year of Irving's Hamlet! I can still see that performance as, alas, I have always seen it—in my mind's eye—largely helped by Ellen Terry, the finest of all dramatic critics without portfolio. Ellen had seen many Hamlets—Fechter, Charles Kean, Rossi, Frederick Haas, Forbes-Robertson; and "they were not in the same hemisphere with Irving." Of the second triumph of 1878 Ellen writes: "It has been said that when Henry had the advantage of my Ophelia, his Hamlet improved. I don't think so. He was always quite independent of the people with whom he acted." Art thou there, Mr Team-actor, likewise Mr Producer? Surely one must be purblind and sand-deaf not to realize that Hamlet's remark about the "robustious, periwig-pated fellow" is addressed not to the great actor, but to his imitators.

Of all Hamlets seen with the physical eye I chiefly recall Forbes-Robertson and the winning sweetness of his kindly prince, his grave courtesy in rebuke. When he listened his whole soul seemed to go out to meet the other's words. He had a peculiarly English sense of self-control and the decencies of soliloquy. "These are but wild and whirling words, my lord," said Horatio. Forbes-

Robertson was never wild, and he never whirled. And if my memory serves me right he omitted the "Emperor for diet" colloquy with the King, knowing that this Baudelairean spleen was out of his compass. Montague compared Forbes-Robertson's Hamlet, when he brought it to Manchester, to a "picture by Watts which can hang in a cathedral and not look silly." This was the only time in my seven years' apprenticeship that I differed from my great master. I had seen a picture by Watts hanging in a cathedral, and it had looked silly. I think of Benson's gnarled, twisted figure, sheer botching as an imitation of humanity, yet inspiring as a gargoyle, with some of the demonic fury proper to Hamlet. Of Laurence Irving, superficially intolerable, sans poetry, sans philosophy, sans pathos. The voice was apparently beyond control, the gust of sound blowing out the phrases like bellying sails. The actor would declaim "and by a sleep to say we end," and come entirely to a full stop. Then, after a long pause, we got the disjointed and now meaningless "the heartache and the thousand natural shocks." Why, then, was this a great Hamlet? Because the actor perceived that Hamlet is Hamlet only to himself and us sitting in the theatre, but that to the court, with the possible exception of Ophelia, he is a cuffed and cowed schoolboy. Because the inner fires of imagination were such that these bodily twists and torturings mattered just as much or as little as Rubinstein's wrong notes or Joachim's playing out of tune mattered. Because Laurence had something of the old man in him.

As one sat awaiting the rise of the curtain the mind went forward as well as backward. "The music to Henry's production," wrote Ellen, "was so apt that it was not remarkable in itself." Should we find Mr Constant Lambert refraining from competition with Tschaikowsky, Liszt and Berlioz, not to mention our old friend Ambroise Thomas? Given Mr Lambert's tact one felt reasonably assured. Even more important, would the décor and dresses be so apt as not to excite notice? There are many ways of staging Shakespeare. I remember a modern-dress affair in which Lady Macbeth harangued her spouse on an art-coloured divan with a satin-wood cabinet gramophone playing the opening of the fourth act of *Carmen*. Could one hope that the nineteen-forties were

"HAMLET"

going to prove less advanced than the nineteen-twenties? Or should we perhaps find ourselves at some pedantic, formalized, pseudo-Elizabethan setting with Ophelia buried in the middle of Gertrude's bedroom? Or would that ceremony be a strictly modish affair with umbrellas dripping and motors purring at the graveyard gate? I seem to remember something of the sort in Mr Guthrie's modern-dress production of the play at the Old Vic in 1938. And the scenes with the Ghost? I remember Forbes-Robertson treating us to a wonderful sunrise and how "the dawn came up like thunder outer" Greenland crost the Cattegat. I do not presume to dictate, but I belong to the school which holds these magnificences to be unnecessary and that *given the actor* any old dawn will do. Would Claudius be given his full weight? Would the actress to play Gertrude settle the vexed question as to how far the Queen was an accessory after the fact? How much of interest would Miss Pamela Brown discover in Ophelia? And Hamlet himself? Remembering that "those move easiest who have learned to dance," one looked to see whether Mr Helpmann would enlarge this to include acting.

And now my space is up. I have no room to say more than that this has proved to be one of the most exciting theatrical events for many a long day. Exciting even if the event turned out to be a disappointment for the favourite's supporters. How so? Because, in racing parlance, the Lord Hamlet after a good start fell away in the middle, came again and lost by a short head to Production, whose clever jockey rode the race throughout in the way he had obviously planned.

February 13, 1944

“Hamlet” Again

ON reflection I must hold that Messrs Guthrie and Benthall's production beat Mr Helpmann's Hamlet not by a head but half a dozen lengths. The fashionable, one-set affair, of course. On the left an exiguous battlement. In the centre a huge column of the kind against which the German painter Winterhalter used to pose the young Queen Victoria. On the right a potting-shed to serve as powder-closet for Gertrude and sepulchre for Ophelia. Up-stage a sloping runway making the whole look like a combination of the old Café Royal and the approach to Liverpool Street Station. The lighting? Total black-out with stabbings as of jay-walkers' torches held at impermissible angles. As usual with these ultra-highbrow jamborees the most elementary mistakes were made. The Ghost's voice clearly came from back-stage instead of the cellar. In the play scene one saw little of the mimic drama, which was done sideways. The King? He was so be-thronged by that producer's toy, a crowd, that one forgot to note him despite Mr Basil Sydney's previous excellences. The Queen, neglecting to watch the show, half turned her back on it and challenged the audience with her handsome brow and unwinking Cyclopean jewel. Don't tell me that a first-night at Elsinore was so common an occurrence that Gertrude was bored; she was not a dramatic critic. Hamlet? He peered over shoulders, peeped under arms, and dodged about in the manner of Dopey in *Snow White*.

Yet Mr Helpmann had begun very well. Sitting apart, his head against a piece of Windsor Castle, he was a most heart-taking little figure. And how like Sarah! The same tousled mop, the same profile, the same collarette, the same provocation, the same elegance. I found myself murmuring with Phèdre:

Il avait votre port, vos yeux, votre langage.

And yet, just as no one ever accused Sarah of masculinity, so Helpmann nowhere suggested the feminine; this was acting on the

androgynous plane of pure poetry, as indeed one expected from an artist in the school of Nijinsky. But poetry, which includes poise and pose and gait and gesture, is not enough for Shakespeare's undanced creation. Maurice Baring has told us that when Sarah played Hamlet there came a time when "the rendering, tradition, the language, the authorship went to the winds: you knew only that something which had been invented by one great genius was being interpreted by another great genius, and that the situation had found an expression which was on its own level." Now apply this. Did Mr Helpmann's genius match his author's? No. Was Mr Helpmann thinking along Shakespeare's lines? No, he was reciting them. One could not believe that the ideas behind the "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy emanated from this brain. Or that this Hamlet would have held that colloquy with the Gravedigger. Shakespeare's thought here is grown-up thought, and the graceful boy lacked the intellectual ascendancy. Apropos of Frédéric Lemaître that great critic, G. H. Lewes, expressed extreme distrust of a French actor whenever he was "profond et rêveur." But the essence of Hamlet is an ingrained melancholy, of which Mr Helpmann gave no sign. The virtuoso passages were well brought off because Mr Helpmann is a born actor and virtuoso. But the basis of this impersonation was *gaminerie*, Eulenspiegel rather than Hamlet. Enchanting if you like, but the wrong kind of enchantment.

Do I, then, dislike or undervalue this performance? Not a whit. On the subject of Shakespeare, as actor Lewes has said:

Had he seen Garrick, Kemble, or Kean performing in plays not his own he might doubtless have perceived a thousand deficiencies in their execution; but had he appeared on the same stage with them, even in plays of his own, the audiences would have seen the wide gulf between conception and presentation. One lurid look, one pathetic intonation, would have more power in swaying the emotions of the audience than all the subtle and profound passion which agitated the soul of the poet, but did not manifestly express itself: the look and the tone may come from a man so drunk as to be scarcely able to stand; but the public sees

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only the look, hears only the tone, and is irresistibly moved by these intelligible symbols.

I had no doubt the other evening that Mr Helpmann was filled with the passion of the poet; eye and ear told me that he was not master of the symbols. Incidentally, what have our team advocates to say to my passage from Lewes? Will they never realize that a great actor's punch is more potent than a hogshead of team-spirit? The trouble with this production is that Mr Helpmann is not a great actor, but a charming one who reduces Hamlet to the size of the figures in a canvas by James Pryde. Miss Pamela Brown's Ophelia was a superbly realistic study in mental overthrow by shock, even if it meant jettisoning Shakespeare's express instructions about turning all "to favour and to prettiness." What a good little actress this is! And what a clever Queen is Miss Margot Grahame, giving an excellent performance whenever she has the light to give it by and the black-out does not force her to over-act! Mr Laurence Hanray's Polonius was perfect. So, too, was Mr Constant Lambert's music, consisting as it did of a handful of chords with a minimum of alarums and no excursions. Would that the scenery had said as little. And as much!

February 20, 1944

Concerning Mr Wolfit

How good an actor was David Garrick? Perhaps I mean how *tragic* an actor. That sixth sense which the theatre gives tells me that Garrick had a genius for comedy but no more than a talent for tragedy. The stories about this actor deceiving the driver of the stage-coach by pretending to be half a dozen passengers in turn, or pulling faces in the servants' hall of a great house to amuse the footmen, or frightening Hogarth by assuming the countenance of the defunct Fielding—all these hint at the natural comedian, who, by taking thought, could transpose himself into the tragic key. And then there is the sobriquet "little Davy." Surely this connotes more than lack of inches? Edmund Kean was short, but who ever dreamed of calling him "little Ned"?

The concernancy?—as Hamlet remarks. Simply that this week I want to consider what Conan Doyle would have called the strange case of Mr Wolfit. It is the weakness of actors to believe that, given enough talent, spirit can not only dominate but change the nature of flesh. This is not so. Henry Irving was the greatest actor I ever saw. Yet, though an ideal Don Quixote, he could not have looked like Sancho Panza; a perfect Malvolio, he could not have looked at Sir Toby; and imagination boggles at what his Falstaff would have been. Now let us consider Mr Wolfit, who has been giving us two of the most testing parts in Shakespeare: Richard III and Othello. Look at this actor's mask from any angle—except that it has no angles whereas Irving's had nothing else—and we see at once that it is the mask of the comedian. Munden, said Lamb—and I must think the same of Garrick—"has no face that you can properly pin down and call *his*." Mr Wolfit can make himself one countenance for Jonson's Volpone and another for Ibsen's Halvard Solness. And I have seen him, as Falstaff, look the exact image of Miss Mitford's Dear Papa, strawberry complexion and all. Here is an actor who can summon up all the expressions there are except the tragic one, the lack of which *in a tragic actor* must be a shortcoming.

In *Richard* this does not matter, for Richard need never look tragic. He must look what the French call *goguenard*, and I apologize that the English language has no equivalent. Any French dictionary will tell you that *goguenard* means *mauvais plaisant*, for which again there is in English no single word, just as we have no single word for *faux bonhomme*. And Richard is both! For *goguenard* let me perhaps read "Quilpish." I maintain that this is Richard's quality, and contend that Mr Wolfit possesses it abundantly. There comes a moment when he is magnificent visually. This is when Richard tells Buckingham for the last time that he is not in the giving vein. Here the actor whirls Richard's robe about him like a catherine wheel made of blood-red suns. His acting here, and again when, receiving the news that Richmond is on the seas, he has the famous

There let him sink, and be the seas on him!

attains the highest gusto. But then, Mr Wolfit's acting from the mounting of the throne to the death on Bosworth Field is, take it for all in all, the finest bit of Shakespearean acting of the robust order I can remember in twenty-five years.

All the early part of Mr Wolfit's Othello is excellently rendered, even if it is not ideally looked. To the eye this is not the noble savage but Stevenson's "ventripotent mulatto." And a Dumasian Othello is surely unthinkable. Yet the actor, even thus handicapped, does what he can. But is it enough? The speech to the Senate is well phrased. There is much feeling in "If it were now to die." And I think I never heard

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

spoken with a more noble pathos. Very good, too, was the "Farewell the tranquil mind" speech, in which Othello retreated up-stage and sighed his soul towards the tents where reputation lay. Why, then, was this Othello not entirely satisfactory? We know that whereas Irving's Iago was superb his Othello was an almost complete failure. Ellen Terry writes, "He screamed and ranted and raved—lost his voice, was slow where he should have been swift,

incoherent where he should have been strong." Mr Wolfit does not fail through lack of voice, of which he has almost more than enough. Indeed, he orchestrates the whole quite sumptuously. He fails because he does not look as we demand that Othello shall look. Or you might put it that while his voice and gestures are tragic, his mien is blubbered. On the other hand he has one outstanding moment matching the one in *Richard*. He is up-stage and has just uttered the words "Othello's occupation's gone." Iago says, "Is't possible, my Lord?" and Othello has his famous:

Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore.

At this line Kean, nearing the end of his career, was wont to advance upon Iago "with a gouty hobble." Mr Wolfit, in full tide, takes a leap *à la* Nijinsky, which brings him at that treacherous throat, and sets the spectator reflecting, first, that for a fine actor to dance may be more effective than for a fine dancer to act, and second, that to act a great part and not look it is better than the other way round.

One other thing: will not Mr Wolfit try to realize that an actor is known by the company he keeps? Kean was not afraid to play with Macready, and Irving welcomed Booth. Will not Mr Wolfit be convinced that his Othello is good enough to stand up to a better Iago, which is one of the great parts in Shakespeare and should be greatly played? "Fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky" may be good Lakeland poetry, but it is dashed poor London theatre. Mr Wolfit should strengthen his company, and if he does, oh, the difference to the box office!

February 27, 1944

Producer's Pie

DIFFERENCES are best composed over the table-cloth. And that is why, when Mr Tyrone Guthrie suggested a supper-time settlement of a recent argument, I accepted with alacrity. Owing to unforeseen circumstances this was twice postponed. Mr Guthrie stood firm; it was I who turned tail. Suppose I lost my temper? Suppose I were to say things which would leave my adversary no possible reply except Damon Runyon's "boff on the beezer"? I withdrew therefore. Whereupon Mr Guthrie wrote me a gallant little note saying:

All right; no supper.

Any 'row' would not have been made by me, for I really would have welcomed your views. I want to know what you propose to substitute for the producer. Some one has to be ultimately responsible for the arrangement of a play. Do you seriously think the leading actor, aided by a stage manager, is the best plan?

It sticks out in all your writing that your taste is for the virtuoso playing cadenzas; this is a bit vulgar of you, but the theatre is, admittedly, a vulgar art form. Admitting, then, the propriety of your views, you must surely admit the necessity for a conductor to control the orchestra, if only to enable the maestro to shine. Or do you only want those concertos which "play themselves"?

Come back at that if you can—and dare.

The answer is that I can and dare and do. But on paper! Of course the stage must have a manager. But not in the way an orchestra has a conductor. An orchestral conductor does more than signal to the oboes when to start and to the bassoons when to stop. His job—or what has come, rightly or wrongly, to be his job—is to use the orchestra to give us, if you please, his, the conductor's, interpretation of this or that masterpiece. So your producer, whom we will call X, uses his company to interpret this or that master-

piece. Now this is all very well when the play is clearly a team-play—say, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If the producer thinks he can best interpret Shakespeare's woodland comedy by giving the fairies glass noses and sealing-wax ears, I do not very much mind, because in this instance the production is the play. In any case I am getting Shakespeare at the familiar one remove, since your rôle normally filled by the self-expressive actor now falls to the self-expressing producer. But I am horribly annoyed when X makes a surrealist Lear emerge from a factory chimney wearing a stove-pipe hat and putting up an umbrella to ward off, while apostrophizing, the elements; what time the Fool and Kent, wearing sou'-westers, Burberrys, and waders, perch on step-ladders and dress the chimney naval-wise, like the flags of allied nations. What enrages me even more than the insanity is the pitiful ambition of the producer who must add his self-expression to his actor's, and so forces me to get my Shakespeare at two removes.

The fact that I notice scenery, costumes, lighting, grouping, and so on, means that my attention is being diverted from the play. I recall a performance of the *Dream* in Regent's Park. I remember that Oberon, played by a delightful actress, wore a costume with a long train, with which he must make a right-angle exit through the bushes. My neighbour, an ardent motorist, nudged me and said, "She'll never do it unless she goes into reverse!" Is anybody going to tell me that with that preoccupation the young man had attended to what the King of the Fairies was saying? "Go not to my uncle's bed," says Hamlet to his mother. Whereupon one expects the present Gertrude to say, "What! And catch my death of cold?"—since in this production if she steps out of bed it must be into the middle of an airfield. Then take the play scene, the point of which is to discover whether the King gives himself away or not. Here, if anywhere, in Shakespeare, is a "necessary question." Surely all that crowd-management, with the players putting up the mimic stage and courtiers swarming to secure coigns of vantage, gets in the way of the answer? If I am challenged to say how I should produce this scene I reply: Study the old painting by Maclise and copy that! And as for the bedroom scene, all that is wanted is a room with a bed; Euclid's first proposition is not simpler.

The best Shakespearean scenery I ever saw was Benson's. I imagine you could have got it all on to one lorry, and the older and shabbier it became, the better.

It all comes back to something Charles Lamb wrote about illustrations to Shakespeare: "I rather prefer the common editions of Roe and Tonson, without notes and with *plates*, which, being so execrably bad, serve as maps or modest remembrancers to the text; and without pretending to any supposable emulations with it, are so much better than the Shakespeare gallery *engravings*, which *did*." I hold the same views on the question of "production." The dramatic critics of the past made no reference to this nuisance, for the blessed reason that it didn't exist. In the finest single piece of dramatic criticism ever written, Montague's notice of *Richard II*, there is not one word about how the thing was staged. Was Montague blind, then, to these later jamborees? By no means. Hear him on Poel's production of *Samson Agonistes*, where he tells us that the pyramidal grouping followed "the pattern of the Ansidei Madonna in the National Gallery, and of the Giorgione altar-piece at Castelfranco." But then Montague knew, and Poel knew, that nobody was going to listen to Milton drooling away without some other kind of entertainment. For Milton, great poet though he was, completely lacked the sense of the stage. And why, pray, should we expect a Puritan to have it?

To sum up. The greater the play, the less production it will need or stand. What *Hamlet* calls for is a great actor who is also his own stage manager. I wonder what would have happened to the producer who, in 1874, had dared to say, "No, Mr Irving. A little less emphasis on 'kin' and more on 'kind.' Remember it's Hamlet's first line. Let me show you!"

March 5, 1944

Mr Wolfit's Hamlet

HAMLET. By William Shakespeare
Scala

HAZLITT said of an actor who shall be nameless, in a part of no interest to the young bloods of to-day, that he did not play the whole character but chipped a bit off it here and there. Mr Wolfit plays the whole of Hamlet, though this is quite a different matter from presenting Hamlet as a whole. The truth is that a consistent, living, 'real' Hamlet does not exist. The late A. B. Walkley laid it down that

Shakespeare, fond, like all the Elizabethan dramatists, of madness as a dramatic *motif*, meant to have "mad scenes" at any cost; that as he also wanted Hamlet for sane actions and speeches, the madness had to be feigned; and that nevertheless, when the madness *motif* was being treated on the stage, Shakespeare, as was the custom of his theatre, treated it "for all it was worth," careless of the boundaries between feigning and reality.

This passage came vividly to mind on Monday night when Mr Wolfit had his "I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers, etc." Of all the Hamlets I have seen this was the first who ever gave the pathos here its proper value; all the others have fought shy of doing this presumably through some mistaken notion about consistency. Now the play has made it quite clear that there are only four people Hamlet cares anything about—himself, his father, his mother, and in the way of friendship, Horatio. Ophelia? Contrast Romeo, who, enslaved by Juliet, would have given his uncle his father's and mother's heads to play at bowls with! The point is that here Shakespeare wanted an exhibition of frenzied grief and therefore arranged for Hamlet to turn on the necessary tap. Wherefore it was entirely right of Mr Wolfit to unloose that flood. The actor throughout matched excitement with sensibleness. Take the line "O all you host of heaven" which immediately follows the Ghost's

"Remember me." Most Hamlets utter this lying prone on the ground and presumably doing their star-gazing through the back of their heads, whereas Mr Wolfit, supine, comes to his senses gazing at the galaxy of heaven. But then the most heartening practicality marked the whole production. Lamb tells us about some painting of the heroic son of Nun bidding the sun stand still that the artist had sunk the miracle into an anecdote of the day, so that the marshalling and landscape of the war became everything and it took the eye several minutes to discover, among all the soldiery present, *which was Joshua*! So is it with some modern productions of the play scene; so is it not with Mr Wolfit's. Hamlet is plainly visible alone in the dead vast and middle of the stage, with his eye on the King and nothing to get in either his or the spectator's line of vision. And so throughout the whole drama, seeing which for the first time an intelligent schoolboy would be able to go home and recount the whole story to his family.

Now let me draw a balance-sheet. On the one side is the lack of physical grace. There is very little suggestion of weakness, and Hamlet's reluctance to put paid to his stepfather's account is almost as inexplicable as it would be in the case of a heavy-weight boxer or Woolwich Arsenal centre-forward. One feels that this Hamlet turns the verse into what Coleridge called good working poetry, and that the flight of angels who must sing him to his rest are not volunteers but have been detailed for the job. There is no aloofness and little suggestion of the princely; this is a bourgeois Hamlet. On the other side of the account one must put a complete grasp of a character mapped as a general maps out a battlefield, enormous virtuosity of expression, and depth of genuine, as opposed to manufactured, passion. I have seen many Hamlets of greater elegance and charm, and I agree that to those who rate the Prince of Denmark according to his pettableness, Mr Wolfit must come very low. But this is to take the lap-dog view of Shakespeare's character, and to regard the play enshrining him in the light of that pagoda in which David Copperfield's Dora housed her yapping, snapping Jip. And Shakespeare's play is not a pagoda. It is, as Montague pointed out, "a monstrous Gothic castle of a poem full of baffled half-lights and glooms." If I must choose a caretaker to

show me round I think it would be Wolfit, who puts me back into Shakespeare's day and time even if the character presented is not Hamlet but some elder, stronger-minded brother. But then I am all for Shakespeare acted in a vein half-way between Gielgud and Tod Slaughter.

The setting at the Scala consisted of a large, open terrace giving on to battlements and the sea, the smaller rooms in the palace being indicated by the letting down of a tapestry and the larger ones by the drawing of curtains. When the cemetery had to be indicated a couple of cypresses were slid into place, and no bones other than Yorick's were made about the portable grave. Of the company I must speak less well. Claudius was pure popinjay; Gertrude might have graced one of Pinero's drawing-rooms; Horatio totally lacked that Dobbinesque quality of fidelity; Polonius had little of the dignity which should be behind that old man's *radotage*. And now for some compensations. The First Gravedigger would have been all right if he had not been in such an obvious hurry to get himself and his scene out of Hamlet's way; Laertes had some quality of glitter; and Miss Iden was thoroughly businesslike in her interpretation of Ophelia's madness. But it is my duty to say that, on the whole, whereas Mr Wolfit did magnificently his court, with one or two exceptions, did not do at all.

March 12, 1944

Hedda Hubbard

THIS WAS A WOMAN. By Joan Morgan
Comedy

MISS JOAN MORGAN's central character has obviously been inspired by those divergent types of women from whom Ibsen drew his Hedda Gabler and Miss Hellman her Regina Hubbard. The plot suggests that Miss Morgan has thought that the Norwegian play could do with a trifle more action and the American play with a greater leavening of psychology. The result, alas, has been not to improve but to worsen. There was in the one case as much action as that flawless play needed, and in the other as much psychological embroidery as its flamboyant happenings could stand. Hedda's mind was not wholly ignoble. She was aware of the fine arts, and while she was equally ready to inspire her lover to a masterpiece or destroy him and it when she ceased to be the source of inspiration, yet one realizes that the book in question would at least not be in the pot-boiling class. Hedda would sell her soul for power, but it would be power put to elegant purpose. Regina is at the opposite pole to Hedda. She too would sell her soul provided her body is enabled to escape from those poky backwoods to Chicago, where the dressmakers will enable her, or rather it, to cut a dash.

Miss Morgan's Olivia is, whether wittingly or subconsciously, a combination of the two. Now the combination of two diametrical opposites is a matter not of addition but of subtraction; the way to achieve grey is to take some of the blackness out of black and some of the whiteness out of white. The compromise is successful in Olivia's case in so far as she has been docked of a good deal of Hedda's disdain and fainéantism; what does not succeed is the attempt to mitigate Regina's essential vulgarity. When John Gabriel Borkman apostrophizes his vast, infinite, inexhaustible kingdom we ask no questions. When he says of the minerals of the earth

I love you, as you lie there spellbound in the deeps and the darkness! I love you, unborn treasures, yearning for the light! I love you with all your shining train of power and glory! I love you, love you, love you!

we believe him. When he says of the great steamships out on the fiord

They weave a network of fellowship all round the world. They shed light and warmth over the souls of men in many thousands of homes. That was what I dreamed of doing,

we also believe him. We believe him because Ibsen has created a giant in whose brain vast conceptions come to natural birth. Olivia, too, has a passage in which she gives her reasons for her lust for power. She too conjures up great ships. And the passage rings false. One feels that if Olivia's ships are liners they will be of the luxury type, and if cargo boats then that their freight will consist of Paris models and Chanel No. 5.

I propose at this stage of the argument to drop Regina, with whom Olivia has very little in common except the act of murder. I propose to ask myself why Olivia is not 'real' in the sense in which Hedda is 'real.' And I must answer that it is because she has not been created at the same white heat of imagination. We know that Hedda married her ridiculous Professor because she was twenty-nine. Because she had danced herself to a standstill. Because none of the young men she had dazzled would come up to scratch. Because she had all-but oversteered her market. Yes, we know all about Hedda's marriage, whereas we know nothing about Olivia's. At twenty, girls marry either for love or out of some very strong brand of affection, and Olivia in her early twenties had married a very decent if unexciting fellow about whose appearance there was nothing absurd, and whose occasional talk about bird-watching cannot have been more boring than Tesman's continual chatter about the History of Civilization. What, then, happened? We are not told. Hedda's mischief was born of the disgust of a loveless marriage reacting upon excessive egotism. Olivia is pure monster with, if you please, shipping ideals. Consider the uses to which Olivia puts her "megalomania." She destroys her

daughter's happiness, wrecks her son-in-law's marriage, contemplates wrecking her son's marriage whenever that shall happen, debauches the mind of the little serving-maid, and finally poisons her husband in order to marry a man she does not love but whose wealth will give her power on the grand scale, the power to set in motion those unbelievable liners!

All this is perhaps to put a little play through an examination more rigorous than it was intended to meet. *This was a Woman* still constitutes on its plane an exciting evening in the theatre, and I should not quarrel with anybody who rated it, apart from the classic revivals, somewhere about fifth or sixth in a list of the best plays to be seen in the West End at the moment. It is in my view extremely well acted. Years ago a fine critic said of that good actress Olga Nethersole that she always filled her cup too full, but that that was not a bad thing at a time when too many cups were empty. Similarly it may be said that Miss Dresdel has no repose, to which I reply that she is in better case than those actresses who have nothing but repose. She is a player who would be known for an actress if she performed before an audience of Esquimaux, Hottentots or Zulus. She can play a grown-up part, and in this connection let the reader ask himself how many actresses we possess to-day who can present a woman in the forties. As I see it, the feminine stage at the moment consists of glamorous ninnies and old and tried war-horses. Miss Dresdel is neither. She is brilliantly supported by Mr John Bryning as the son who checkmates his mother, and by Miss Nova Pilbeam, who twinkles agreeably.

March 19, 1944

All Plays are Too Long

ONE ROOM. By Reginald Long

Apollo

SOMETHING FOR THE BOYS. A Revue

Lyrics and music by Cole Porter

Coliseum

UNCLE HARRY. By Thomas Job

Garrick

So the young fellow went back and . . ." A perfect anecdote because the teller doesn't bore you with the recital of what, given the end of the story, must be its beginning. The actor-manager's command to his secretary, "Cut the string; cut the play; and then tell me what it's about," is the perfect theatrical behest. Perfect because all plays are too long. All films are too long, including the food-flash! All novels are too long; one day I shall tear out of my beloved Balzac those dreadful pages about the paper-making and coach-building industries. All oratorios are too long. All German operas are too long except, of course, for Germans. Wagner, having in the *Ring* one-fourth of what Shakespeare had to say in *Hamlet*, and most of it turgid nonsense, took four times as long to say it. Which only shows what a long-winded bore your Teuton can be when he makes up his mind to it. Curtailing demands only contrivance. Our longitudinarians cannot plead the school-boy's excuse for the giraffe's exorbitant neck—that anything shorter wouldn't reach to its head.

In the preface to *St Joan* Mr Shaw has the following:

To a professional critic theatre-going is the curse of Adam. The play is the evil he is paid to endure in the sweat of his brow; and the sooner it is over, the better. This would seem to place him in irreconcilable opposition to the paying playgoer, from whose point of view the longer the play, the more entertainment he gets for his money.

There are one or two things to be said here. The paying playgoer is normally a playgoer to whom the act of playgoing constitutes in itself a pleasurable experience. He finds the lights and the crowd exciting. The intervals entrance him. To-morrow he will tell his pals how he thought Frank Fadeless "was pretty good last night; never better, old boy, in all the years I've known him." And at some tea-party his wife will tell her envious friends exactly what Venda Droop was wearing. With these pleasurable anticipations the normal playgoer and his wife will sit through the longest and dullest entertainment without consciousness of time or boredom. Anyhow, it's better than being at home and sitting one on each side of the fireplace, having said all they had to say to each other twenty years ago. He is agog for the moment when the curtain shall go up; the professional critic aches for it to come down. He longs for release from the witlessness of some empty farce, or tedious musical comedy. If only theatre managers would come round after the first act and whisper to one, "Run away if you want to; we shan't mind." What rapturous notices they would get! It is having to sit there hour after hour digging one's nails into one's palms that does the mischief. If only dramatic critics were encouraged to go while the going is good!

One Room, the new farce at the Apollo, is about such legitimate pleasures as the fun house-painters have when peeping in at the windows of artists who paint from the nude, ladies who get tipsy, and what Stevenson calls "d'Artagnan's ungentlemanly and perfectly improbable trick upon Milady," only played the other way round. Since no critic remembers aught of what he leaves in this kind, what is't to leave betimes?

About *Something for the Boys* I don't know what to say, except that I could find in it nothing for an elderly critic. There was a moment when a little actress in an ecstasy of something or other kicked off a shoe so that it fell into the orchestra. One remembered how Malibran, in an excess of somnambulism or Maid-of-Artoisism, or some other operatic frenzy, launched a shoe right into the middle of Covent Garden stalls. Whereupon some enthusiast cried, "Kick us the other one!" Which that great artist did, finishing her Polo-

naise, or whatever it was, barefooted. And that is all I remember about the show at the Coliseum.

Now let us consider *Uncle Harry*. The secret of intellectual acting is that anybody can do it.

At present only a few men work in Russia. The vast majority of the educated people that I know seek after nothing, do nothing and are as yet incapable of work. They treat the peasants like animals, learn nothing, read nothing serious, do absolutely nothing, only talk about science, and understand little or nothing about art. They are all serious; they all have solemn faces; they only discuss important subjects; they philosophize; but it's plain that all our clever conversations are only meant to distract our own attention and other people's.

No question of *acting* stuff like this passage from *The Cherry Orchard*. You either sit and talk it, or stand and talk it. Any actor can play Trophimof, the perpetual student, provided he looks like Mr Mell, the perpetual usher. But to call on the governor of a prison, get jammed in the doorway with the executioner who to-morrow morning is going to hang your younger sister for the crime of having murdered your elder one, and then to confess that it was you who put the prussic acid in Hester's cocoa and arranged for it to look like Lettie's doing—this takes acting, and a real actor. Mr Michael Redgrave plays the shabby poisoner so well that here and now I take the responsibility of advising him to give up the intellectual drama and devote himself to the profession. The next best playing comes from Miss Ena Burrill as Hester—a frightening picture of a gaunt, sex-starved virago. Miss Lehmann as Lettie also gives an excellent performance, but she has done this kind of thing often, whereas Miss Burrill is making her first descent from the glamorous to the morbid. Wherefore in all fairness Mr Redgrave should lead both ladies forward at the end, instead of the present arrangement which is like Lear offering courtesies to Regan while snubbing Goneril.

March 26, 1944

The Least Said . . .

A MURDER FOR A VALENTINE. By Vernon Sylvaine

Lyric

SALUTE THE SOLDIER. Written by Guy Schofield

Devised by Ernest Heasman

Stoll

A Murder for a Valentine has an excellent first act, a middling second, and a third which is nonsense. Delia Channing (Miss Cathleen Nesbitt) is a maiden lady of uncertain age with a strength of character like that of Lady Macbeth, Medea and the Medusa combined. When she speaks, little serpents fall from her mouth on to the floor and coil themselves on their tails to add their venom to hers. But Mr Sylvaine would have us understand that Delia has not been bad from the beginning, that she is essentially a starved woman whose first and only sweetheart has married her sister. It is true that she has a paramour, one Ernest Motford (Mr Malcolm Keen), dashing if middle-aged, and built rather on the lines of Thomas Wainewright. We gather, however, that it is a passionless liaison, and one thinks of Cayley Drummle's picture of the first Mrs Tanqueray, "all marble arms and black velvet," and how Aubrey hoped in vain that she would thaw. Not that this play's Mr Motford can entertain any such notion, his Delia being shrouded in blackest silk from top to toe with nary a snatch of marble visible.

Let me, however, get back to the eighteen-seventies. To Delia has been bequeathed Veronica, her orphaned niece and heiress to a fortune. Now Motford resembles Wainewright in ways other than love of poetry and the fine arts; he is hard up. Why not murder Veronica, asks Delia, who, inheriting the money, will hand it over to Motford? But Motford deems murder at best a tricky business. Very well, says Delia, no need to put Veronica away. Let her be kept in the bedroom Delia prepared for her marriage thirty years ago, and which she has preserved *à la* Miss Havisham. The pair agree to pretend that Veronica—who, by the way, is about to have

a baby by a soldier-lover—has thrown herself into the river. (What they are going to do with her after the suicide story has been accepted we are not told.) But here Motford makes a slip. He falls for Veronica, and promises, if she will marry him, to forget all about that bag of bones which is Delia. Alas for Motford, the bag overhears.

And then Motford overreaches himself. Did this unfortunate young lady make any effort to save herself, asks Scotland Yard's affable representative (Mr Julien Mitchell). But, of course, says Motford, that inveterate quoter across whose memory now float some lines from his favourite poet:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.

He describes how Veronica-Ophelia clutches at a willow plainly to be seen from the drawing-room window, and how, alas, an envious sliver broke. Whereupon the detective says that this is all his eye since the willow is twenty yards up a stream running with such force that England's champion swimmer couldn't have made a foot of headway against it. Bad theatre because we see the point before the detective does. The second act is taken up with the trial of Motford, the bag of bones snatching its revenge by refusing to give evidence.

The disastrous third act? Sir Max Beerbohm once told the London dramatic critics that they were as fine a body of men as the Metropolitan Police. Let me return the compliment and say that the Metropolitan Police are at least as intelligent as the Critics' Circle. Put the youngest member of that august body in a room in which a living person is known to be concealed, and I think he will find that person, even if it means pulling down all panels and measuring the thickness of the wall at all points. I take it to be a libel on the Yard that this play's detective does not think of this. And now Motford, having escaped from the van which is taking him to Broadmoor, enters in time to hear Delia thank her peculiar gods for eight o'clock on a fine sunny morning. Whereupon Motford, who has not been hanged, and deciding that he may as well go to Broadmoor for two murders as for one, throttles Delia. Why is this an unsatisfactory thriller? Not because the facts will

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not bear examination when we get home, but because they do not stand up while we are still in the theatre. Mr Keen's urbanity in all circumstances is very pleasant, Mr Mitchell is superb whenever he has the chance, and once more Miss Nesbitt puts to bed ninety-nine out of every hundred of our other so-called actresses.

Since *Salute the Soldier* has been concocted without ingenuity, eloquence or wit, one had to find entertainment in one's self. What does the shade of Cromwell feel about those Restoration dramatists of his provoking? Wolfe's "Gentlemen, I would rather have written Gray's *Elegy* than take Quebec"? But is the dilettante spirit quite what we want to foster? I imagine that most of Stalin's generals are more interested in the new push than in the old Pushkin. Also that our modern British commanders are keener about the second front than the Second Symphony of Elgar or anybody else. In the matter of those Scotch pipers would Vigny have written

Dieu! que le son de la cornemuse est triste au fond des Trossachs?

These and other fancies whiled away an entertainment about which one would only say what an earlier critic said about Mr Shaw's poetry: "We salute an honest effort." Honest but mistaken, and much of it embarrassing.

April 9, 1944

Every Inch King Lear

KING LEAR. By William Shakespeare
Scala

YEARS ago Mr Shaw wrote:

With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare when I measure my mind against his.

Before going to see *King Lear* the other evening I had another look at Mr Shaw's *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, and really it seemed to me that Shakespeare didn't come out of the comparison too badly. It has been said that Lear cannot be acted. But can the Elderly Gentleman? Can any actor make anything of

As President of the Baghdad Historical Society I am in a position to inform you that my Society has printed an *editio princeps* of the works of the father of history, Thucyderabadus Macollybuckle. Have you read his account of what was blasphemously called the Perfect City of God, and the attempt made to reproduce it in the northern part of these islands by Jonhobsnoxius, called the Leviathan?

If this is actable, then, taking my cue from the Fool, I'll go to the play at midnight.

While Macbeth may be the most difficult character in Shakespeare to interpret, Lear is the most difficult to act. The difference is that between the slow bowler and the fast. Brains will make the one; *fougue* and physique, which are natural gifts and not intellectual attainments, are necessary for the other. To begin with, Lear is not, and never can be, a young man's part. It is not in the nature of things that a young actor, whatever his brains, should be able to body forth the gigantic figure of a Colossus of heathen antiquity. Mr Wolfit has the minimum number of years necessary for the

accomplishment of the most tremendous task that can ever confront the player. Let me say straightaway that he has enormously improved since he was last seen in the part some fifteen months ago. Of his performance at the St James's I remember saying that he did nothing which we could not explain, and that his playing, while it never failed or flopped, never lit on the floor of magic. Let me now reverse that judgment. On Wednesday evening Mr Wolfit did nothing which one could explain. As for the floor, he opened abysses before our feet. Indeed, I am not sure that there was not occasional question of "amazed and sudden surrender to some stroke of passionate genius." It is certain that the audience surrendered to the stroke of something without quite knowing what. It left the theatre conscious of having been swept off its feet and not bothering to wonder why.

It is the business of the critic not to wonder but to expound. What are the things that we demand from any Lear? First, majesty. Second, that quality which Blake would have recognized as moral grandeur. Third, mind. Fourth, he must be a man and, what is more, a king, in ruins. There must be enough voice to dominate the thunder, and yet it must be a spent voice. Lear must have all of Prospero's "beating mind," but a mind enfeebled like his pulse. The actor must make us feel in the heath and hovel scenes that we are in the presence—*pace* Mr Shaw—of a flaming torch beside which Michael Angelo and Bach are but tapers. The impression may not be correct, but he is not a great actor who does not create it. Mr Wolfit had and was all the things we demand, and created the impression Lear calls for. I say deliberately that his performance on Wednesday was the greatest piece of Shakespearean acting I have seen since I have been privileged to write for the *Sunday Times*.

I think I was most struck by the extraordinary cohesion of the whole. It has been said, I forget by what critic, that Shakespeare faltered when he made Lear inveigh at such length and with such vehemence against those sins of the flesh which for some time have not been his concern. Mr Wolfit suggests a possible reason for this. The chain of argument starts when, in reply to Regan's "I am glad to see your highness," Lear has his

EVERY INCH KING LEAR

If thou shouldst not be glad,
I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb,
Sepulchring an adultress.

Lear is for ever harping on one or other of his daughters, as we know he must. Mr Wolfit makes us feel that behind the obsession of their cruelty is the one possible, unbearable explanation. Lear has only to see Gloucester to say "Goneril, with a white beard!" the train of thought being that

Gloucester's bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters
Got 'tween the lawful sheets.

And now into the cracked mind comes the half-thought that perhaps the daughters were not lawfully begotten. From which "To't, luxury, pell-mell!" follows naturally. The point is a small one, but the actor who makes it shows that the matter and impertinency of this great play is of the nature of a chemical combination rather than a mechanical mixture.

There are parts that Mr Wolfit cannot play. He would not, one feels, dream of casting himself for, say, Romeo or Richard II or any rôle which demands extreme physical grace and conspicuous elegance. Indeed, I feel that he plays Hamlet only because no leading actor can afford to bypass the Dane. But let us see what he can, and does, give us in full and overflowing measure—Lear, Othello, Richard III, Shylock, Bottom, Falstaff, not to mention such trifles as Volpone, Giovanni (Ford) and Solness (Ibsen). I feel that this player must now tackle Macbeth. Ellen Terry was accustomed to say, "It is no use an actress wasting her nervous energy battling with her physical attributes. She had much better find a way of employing them as allies." The same goes for actors. If Mr Wolfit's Macbeth is as good as I think it must be, he will wrest that barren sceptre from Mr Gielgud's gripe and in exchange surrender Hamlet's diadem. No, readers, I am not trying to put one actor above the other. Their orbits lie apart.

The scenery was bare yet ample, and blessedly there was no nonsense about 'production.' The company showed fewer weaknesses than usual, though it is still not strong enough. Mr Richard

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Goolden was an ingenious and moving Fool; Mr Eric Maxon as Gloucester agonized agreeably; Miss Elizabeth Bayly's Goneril was too light; Miss Ann Chalkley's Regan was too dark—these two should exchange rôles. Miss Iden as the gormless Cordelia couldn't have failed if she had tried. Ellen Terry professed to find something in that annoying young woman; my view is that she put it there. If I were the Government I should let any bricks-and-mortar National Theatre stew in its own juice, and send Mr Wolfitt round the country with a sufficient subsidy to enable him to make first-rate additions to his company, and a posse of dramatic critics to see that he did so.

April 16, 1944

Chalk and Cheese

GUILTY. (Revival.) Adapted from Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*
By Kathleen Boutall
Lyric, Hammersmith

THE REST IS SILENCE. By Harold Purcell
Prince of Wales

A YOUNG woman stopped me just as I was getting into a taxi. "Excuse me, Mr Agate, but I'm worried about *Thérèse Raquin*. Can a play which has no moral be a good play?" This question has teased many minds. Mr Shaw has laid it down that all art should be didactic. Shelley, on the other hand, held that art should confine itself to invigorating the imagination and trust the invigorated imagination to behave itself better. (My own view is that the invigorated imagination behaves worse.) When *Thérèse Raquin* first appeared, the critics fell to prating of *ordure et puanteur*. Whereupon Zola defied them to discover in his novel

une page réellement licencieuse, faite pour les lecteurs de ces petits livres roses, de ces indiscretions de boudoir et de coulisses qui se tirent à dix milles exemplaires.

(I really can't be bothered to translate; it may help if I say that *page* means "page," *réellement* "really" and *licencieuse* "licentious." *Und so weiter*.) Lear recommended the anatomizing of Regan because he wanted to see what bred about her heart; Zola claimed to have dissected Thérèse and Laurent well knowing that they had no heart. Throwing together a vigorous, calculating brute and a sex-starved wife with a nincompoop for a husband, he asked himself what would happen. He found the answer in one of those Sunday outings dear to the heart of the Paris shopkeeper. Sunday outings mean the Seine, the Seine means boating, and boating means accidents. Camille having "become drowned," as Lorelei would put it, we should certainly credit Zola with tackling something that Shakespeare funk'd. This is the conversation between a

guilty pair after they have murdered sleep. But the trouble with this play is the old one of being an adaptation from a novel, which means that too much has to be crowded into the third act. Alternatively, the trouble is that Zola was not Ibsen, who wouldn't have bothered with those first two acts at all. Having revolved these matters quickly in mind, I raised my hat and said, "Madam, the answer to your question is: Yes and no." And stepped into the cab.

The acting? Alas, within the previous twenty-four hours I had seen a company of French players at the Comedy Theatre in Charles Vildrac's *Le Paquebot Tenacity*. Obviously I didn't expect a faithful reproduction of Zola's play by English actors any more than I should expect a convincing performance of *Juno and the Paycock* from a company of Esquimaux. I look to find that charming hypocrisy whereby the English explain the sordid in terms of respectability which has somehow slipped. And I found it. Was Miss Flora Robson's Thérèse an Emma Bovary of the gutter, without heart, conscience or soul? Nonsense. Miss Robson had lots of all three, as worn in Kensington. Was old Madame Raquin Zola's avaricious harpy with her fingers so bent with scraping money into the till that she couldn't straighten them? Nothing of the sort. Miss Violet Farebrother made her an old dear, recognizable in Brixton. Mr Roy Malcolm was a husband who had never got nearer Paris than Broadstairs. Mr Michael Golden as the lover? All right, except that he seemed allergic to his mistress. Mr O. B. Clarence's Grivet? Here I change my tune. Whether this exquisite actor pretends to be a clerk in the Mincing Lane of Elia's period or *un vieil employé du chemin de fer d'Orléans* in the Paris of the 'sixties doesn't matter to me. But then, it wouldn't matter to me if Mr Clarence gave out that he was the Porter in *Macbeth*, or old Hardcastle, or Cayley Drummle, or Mr Shaw's Inquisitor. I know perfection when I see it, and am indifferent to the label.

Mr Black, with the assistance of Messrs Harold Purcell and William Armstrong, has struck a new note in murder—this is to make parade and spectacle of something essentially intimate. "How now, you secret, black, and midnight hag! What is't you did, or didn't do?" is the essential question to be put to any woman suspected of murdering by poison. In Madeleine Smith's case there

were five possibilities. (1) There was no arsenic in l'Angelier's cocoa. (2) There was arsenic, and Smith put it there. (3) L'Angelier drank the cocoa knowing Smith had put it there. (4) L'Angelier put it there himself. (5) Being a confirmed arsenic-eater, l'Angelier died of an overdose self-administered after leaving Smith. None of these points is raised in *The Rest is Silence* (Prince of Wales). Nor has the author made up his mind whether Smith was guilty or not. Now a playwright who dramatizes murder *must* make up his mind, because his chief character is two different women according as she is guilty or innocent. Unless, of course, he is a Pirandello and capable of a heroine who is a murderess if you think so, and not if you don't. Will Mr Purcell argue that he can't be expected to succeed where a jury failed? Then he must choose some other crime.

In spite of the elaborate trial-scene the play on Thursday evening seemed to be not essentially more concerned with the famous case than with the Crimean War, or the opening of the Crystal Palace, where, indeed, most of it seemed to be happening! Bevvies of young ladies skimming and swirling in crinolines, etc. Mr Nicholas Hannen, as Smith's father, tried to put a good face on these over-size matters, but I thought my favourite actor, Mr Martin Walker, as the elderly fiancé would make a bolt for it at any moment. Smith? What could poor Miss Ann Todd do? There she was, obviously ready to face up to the hard-featured creature who got herself mixed up in a sordid crime, while all she was allowed to do was to look fetching in the first half of the show and, except for a flashback or two, sit mum throughout the second. L'Angelier? This was entrusted to that first-rate actor, Mr Karel Stepanek. But what the part really called for, given the musical comedy lay-out, was not an actor at all but a young gentleman who could wave a top-hat and swing a cane and a tune. At least that is the way I see the *jeune premier* in *O'erflows my Spirit*, the version of the Maybrick case which I am proposing to write for the Palladium.

April 23, 1944

Try It the Other Way Round

I AM open to correction, but it seems to me that whereas the playgoer puts the intellectual or, if you like, emotional quality of a play first, the filmgoer concentrates on the succession of visual images without bothering very much what they amount to. Let me invent a shot illustrating what I understand is called the "basically visual" method of the film. The screen shows a desk. On the desk is a cheque for £10,000 which somebody has torn in two. By the side of the cheque is a saucer full of cigarette-ends, suggesting the hours of irresolution which have preceded the act of destruction. As a playgoer I do not find this interesting unless I am also interested in the reasons (a) why the cheque was drawn and (b) why it was destroyed, whereas, as a filmgoer, I am supposed to be so excited by the deftness of the visual jugglery that I have no mind for anything else.

Which brings me to my point. We are constantly seeing films which have been made out of plays; are there no plays which could be made out of reasonably good films? I do not mean pictures like *Dark Victory* and *The Little Foxes* which, I believe, were stage-plays before they were pictures. What I am asking is whether there may not be some potentially good drama buried in the films we have enjoyed and forgotten. But first a word or two in my capacity as both play- and film-goer. I see all the productions in each kind, and comparison between the two media is inevitable. I find that whereas a great play greatly acted remains in my mind for days, and a good play well acted for some hours, I have forgotten the best film before I sit down to supper, and cannot remember what a second-rate one has been about even in the act of diving for my hat. As against this, I am more often bored at the theatre than in the cinema. No film that was ever made can annoy me as much as your maddeningly stupid, tenth-rate farce.

There is perhaps a reason for this. Many people have found that they can listen with equanimity over the air to emanations of

rubbish which would drive them out of the concert hall. There is always the wonder—which familiarity does not diminish—of sound coming out of a little box. I have no doubt that when television is perfected I shall laugh at farces which would send me bellowing from the theatre. This because the medium will intrigue me. So, in the cinema, there is always the fun of the photography, *to which must be added that variety which the stage must ever be denied*. Is what ought to be the emotional tension getting to resemble a bit of tired elastic? The scenario-monger has only to send his heroine for a canter on some mare as good-looking as her rider, and all is well again. Is the hero wobbling between his home-keeping little wife and some back-stage enchantress? Then let him, on his way between dressing-room and the box in which he has dumped his encumbrance, be startled by the cry of fire. Whichever of the two women he saves, the fire will be fun, especially if done in Technicolor. (The eruption of Etna or Vesuvius would be better.) What I am trying to say is that at the pictures I can be amused, because of the extraneous entertainment, by a succession of events which at the theatre I should find petrifyingly dull. Let it be granted, at this point, that you cannot, *in the nature of things*, make out of the best in one medium the best in another. Whoever films Shakespeare must bungle the job: you do not add to Prospero's magic by a fade-out of cloud-capp'd towers. Whoever makes a stage-play out of a masterpiece by Eisenstein must make a mess of it: you cannot reduce crowd-sequences to scraps of playwright's dialogue. But let us leave the high plane and consider a lower one. Let us come to the point where something which in the cinema is made seeable by its medium becomes, when it is taken out of that medium, just not seeable. A good example is that most amusing film, *Here Comes Mr Jordan*, which, when made into a play, crashed almost as badly as the aeroplane in the picture.

But there must surely be film plots which do not crash? For my own amusement I have made a scenario for a picture to be made out of Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*. It has the following cast: Aubrey Tanqueray, Clive Brook; Paula, Sonia Dresdel; Ellean, Hilary Allen (with song in third act); Cayley Drummle, Ronald Squire; Mrs Cortelyon, Helen Haye; Captain Hugh Ardale,

Martin Walker; Sir George Orreyed, Michael Shepley; Lady Orreyed, Marian Spencer. For Hollywood production the cast would be: Ronald Colman, Marlene Dietrich, Deanna Durbin (with songs throughout), Roland Young, Gladys Cooper, George Sanders, Nigel Bruce, Billie Burke. (Magnates who are interested will please communicate through the usual channels.) I have slightly altered the end, making Paula go blind and retreat to, if you please, Ellean's convent in Northern Ireland. But the lay-out of the play remains the same. The point? The point is that the scope of the picture is visually magnificent since the scenes include Algiers, off which Peter Jarman's yacht used to lie, India, where Ardale got his V.C., the first Mrs Tanqueray's funeral (a touch of Orson Welles here, please), the Avenue de Friedland in Paris, the Prater in Vienna, Aubrey's room in Albany, the drawing-room at Highercoombe, and, of course, that convent! *Despite the peripatetics I have contrived that there shall still be what was always a thundering good play.*

Now it has occurred to me that some enterprising manager might, in view of the dearth of playwrights, like to try reversing the process. Let him go through all those films which waft the spectator from Palm Beach to Popocatepetl, and then by luxury liner from Oraheite to Monte Carlo with flashbacks to Sing-Sing and the waterfront at Shanghai. *Surely one of these dazzling itineraries must be the cloak for a story worth telling on the stage?* If not, then the cinema is automatically reduced to the "Reading Without Tears," A-Cat-Was-On-a-Mat level. I just don't believe this. I don't believe that the cinema has no function beyond giving the spectator an eyeful. I believe that, in spite of its preoccupation with "visual validity," the screen must, from time to time, tell a tale which would be dramatic even in another medium.

April 23, 1944

A Play of Ideas

ZERO HOUR. By Ronald Millar
Duke of York's

HOW ARE THEY AT HOME? By J. B. Priestley
Apollo

WALKLEY said that, faced with a play of ideas, it was the function of the critic "not only to examine the playwright's solution, but suggest another one of his own, and in fact pass in review all the possible permutations and combinations of the problem presented." Such a review, said Walkley, would naturally tend to be a little tidier than the play; it was even probable that, because of the critic's passion for logical symmetry, half the ideas the playgoer had read about in the critic's review would not be found in the piece, and that those that were in the piece would not be so ship-shape. Mr Ronald Millar's *Zero Hour* is largely a three-cornered argument taking place at Dover on the night IT happens, the debaters being Professor Mallory (Mr J. H. Roberts), an idealist with an alchemist's illusion about the power of education; Baumer (Mr Gerard Hinze), a captured but undefeated German airman; and Stephen Marlowe (Mr Eric Portman), anti-democrat and Fascist.

Permit me to take a leaf out of Walkley's book and elucidate this play's debate by paraphrasing it. Let me begin with Mallory. I was talking the other day with one of those pacifists *enragés* who refuse to believe (a) that there are nations whose character, compounded equally of sadism and masochism, inclines them to war, or (b) that there is anything abstract or symbolical about the famous "brotherhood of man." He said, "I believe that all men are as to ninety per cent. of their make-up the same men under different skins, that race and heredity account for no more than ten per cent. of any difference and that the rest is a matter of education and environment. I believe that six new-born infants of six different races, brought up under the same conditions and given the same education, would, when they arrived at the age of twenty-one, all think and feel in the same

way and hold the same social and political code." I said, "Shall we assume that the crèche is in Bloomsbury? That the ideology is British Left Wing? That the six infants are English, French, Hungarian, Russian, the offspring of Harlem and the head-hunters of Borneo?" My friend nodded. I went on, "Are we to conclude that at the age of twenty-one the young Englishman will have lost his taste for Test Matches, the Frenchman for gesticulating, the Hungarian for horses, the Russian for dancing, the Harlemiter for loud clothes and purple shirts, and that the young gentleman from Borneo will be able to pass without a tremor the blocks in a hair-dresser's window?" My friend said, "Certain racial predispositions would remain. But they would be vestigial; essentially the young men would all feel and think alike." I said, "Meaning what?" He said, "I mean that they would all feel and think internationally."

This goes for Mallory. Extend the hand of friendship to defeated Germany, let bygones be bygones, and the Nazi will at once shed certain unpleasant characteristics which we must believe him not to have possessed before the Treaty of Versailles. He will see that implicit obedience is the essence of sheep, not of free man. He will embrace the non-Aryan as a brother, renounce the *Herrenvolk* notion, turn his back on Wagner's prancing gods and goddesses, and deny that Nietzsche ever existed. In short, the back of his once square head will have become as round as that of any little boy at Eton. But this is exactly what the German airman fears. He harangues the Fascist in an impassioned outburst. "To a defeated Germany," he says, "shall England show no mercy! Such a Germany will be seduced by the democratic ideal, and so will she betray her destiny as World-Master-Race-Ruler. England shall glut her wrath. [The airman means 'must,' but he naturally translates the German *sollen* by 'shall.'] England shall crucify us. Only from such martyrdom can arise a Germany which out of defeat wring final victory."

The Fascist? His point of view is that ordinary people, brainless almost to idiocy and alive to that brainlessness, have no choice. *They must elect a leader to do their thinking for them.* And if such a leader bids them hurl themselves upon destruction, they are to obey as cheerfully as Chaka's warriors obeyed when that dusky

dictator bade them march into the flames. It seemed to the audience that the play's buxom music-hall comedienne settled this gentleman's hash with the simple exclamation: "Don't talk daft!" (Personally I have a sneaking sympathy with the Alexanders, the Julius Caesars, the Charlemagnes, the Peter the Greats, and the Cromwells. I have a feeling that what may be wrong with dictatorship is the wrong dictator; I certainly should never have feared a Germany with a Goethe at its head, and I cannot think this country would ever have quarrelled with an Italy obedient to a Garibaldi.) Actually there is a disillusioned idealist hanging about with enough sense to throw the Fascist over Shakespeare's cliff. And there I must stop.

"Marry, how? Tropically," said Hamlet. Take one letter out of the last word and you have Mr Priestley's play for the moment. *How are They at Home?* is a good charade as charades go, and this one is going to the Forces overseas. "The newsreels tell the folks at home all about us," argue the boys. "Why doesn't somebody tell us how and what they are doing in England?" Mr Priestley's impromptu and goodish little joke is the answer. Impromptu because this master can write a play during the time duller-witted people take to decide whether they will have their first act in Berkeley Square or the Cotswolds; and goodish because his pawky, provincial humour never deserts him. And not more than goodish because it is not good enough. The anecdote is concerned with a Lady Farfield, now a charge-hand in a factory, and how she throws a party for her co-workers. How first an American officer, who might be excused, mistakes the party for a present-day convocation of Mr Waugh's Vile Bodies. And how a singularly obtuse Group Captain and his squadron leader, who appears to have been to school at Naunton Wayne, fall into the same trap. Mr Priestley finds room for a mute and inglorious but charming love-scene between a corporal and a machine-hand. Room, too, for a civil servant so tired of playing second fiddle in Whitehall that he has arranged to play first fiddle in his own string quartet. The piece is well acted by lots and lots of agreeable people.

May 7, 1944

“For the Defendant!”

CRISIS IN HEAVEN. By Eric Linklater

Lyric

LET us consider bores. Not the real-life article, the button-holer who before your glazed eye unrolls the panorama of his vacant mind. Nor again what Walkley called “enchanting bores.” I would discuss, not these, nor even the writers of boring plays. My theme is those who in a theatre are bored, and why. It has been insufficiently remarked that whoever is without mind can never know or understand boredom. Nine-tenths of story-tellers are bores because they interrupt the current of more amusing thought. Equally, since most people find less amusement in their own thoughts than in some dull, ten-times repeated tale, it follows that most people are insusceptible of boredom. Even so, the pretence of being bored flatters their vanity, which brings us, or rather them, to the radio. They don’t listen, of course, but they have the pleasant feeling that they could listen as they would. I imagine that if a Gallup Survey were taken of 100 alleged listeners the result would be something as follows: Engaged in housework 60 per cent. Reading newspapers 20 per cent. Talking 10 per cent. Taking a nap 4 per cent. Playing nap 3 per cent. Letter-writing 2 per cent. Listening 1 per cent. Some little time ago I listened to an imaginary conversation on the wireless between Rabelais and Swift, dramatized by Mr Linklater. And at once I realized two things. First, that nine-tenths of the people listening must be assumed never to have heard of these Great Men; and, second, that the tenth which had heard of them was probably engaged in making out its income-tax return. And I at once constituted myself Mr Linklater’s advocate. Why, in the circumstances, should he bother about wit which could only be wastage? Unlike the listener who is bored the playgoer cannot dismiss boredom by turning a knob. As for the critic, his duty to his paper and his sense of courtesy towards management and players—these have tied him to a stake; he cannot fly, but bear-like, he must fight the course. (At least Macbeth had the diversion

“FOR THE DEFENDANT!”

of Macduff's dogs!) The man in the stocks can troll a stave; but woe betide the critic who hums without hawing!

I think perhaps that the greatest strain is put on the dramatic reporter when he realizes that the playwright is not addressing him but another kind of audience. First of all, of whom is any theatre audience made up? Of 100 per cent. intellectuals? With apologies to the gallery, no. Is it an uneducated rabble? The stalls would be annoyed to think so. But somewhere between gods and stalls there must always be a nucleus, indeed a preponderance, of non-culturalists to whom the heroes of the antique and near-modern world mean nothing, which heroes must therefore be explained. Mr Linklater begins with Frederick the Great, about whom it must be indicated—for the nucleus has no means of guessing—that this was a King of Prussia who went stamping up and down Europe waving a sword. But why “Great”? Alas, Mr Linklater has no time to show the element of greatness; his business is to tell how the silly old man came to be friendly with the cross and tetchy Voltaire. And who, pray, is this Voltaire? Or is the question: Why was Voltaire's period called the Age of Reason? Alas, Mr Linklater hasn't the time to give us the essential answers any more than he has the time to give an uncommonly serious fellow, one Aristophanes who now bobs up, lines worthy of the writer of antiquity's wittiest comedies. Alas, the old boy is too much pre-occupied with the importance of being earnest in the next world to utter a single good thing worthy of this! We can pass over Abraham Lincoln and Florence Nightingale, since most people have seen plays about both. Helen of Troy is another easy one, because Mr Cochran had a show about her. (Or is the playgoer sure he isn't confusing this lady with Cora Pearl? Anyhow he saw Miss Evelyn Laye play both.) Volumnia? But why should one given to Juno-like lament rant and rave like a First Witch? Then we have Pushkin, a Russian poet, Froust, an English poet, the Vicar of Bray, Galen, a doctor, an English Soldier, and one Irene, the daughter of Voltaire and Helen of Troy—in racing parlance by Reason out of Sex Appeal. She turns out, by the way, to be a fully fledged policewoman.

Those, then, are the characters in a play about what? Vaguely peace, and how, when peace comes, the ordinary man will be able

to get back to his pub, pint of beer and game of dominoes, and marry the girl of his choice and pat the heads of little ones clustering at his knee. In other words, a matter of push-cart rather than Pushkin. Well, some of us have heard this too often to want to spend an evening listening to it all over again. Indeed, I seem to have stumbled on an abyss of boredom which must be the deepest of all theatrical gulfs—that of the converted having conversion urged upon them in a stodgy sermon lasting close on three hours. On the other hand, and again constituting myself Mr Linklater's advocate, I recognize a twixt-earth-and-heaven, say Upper Circle audience, who are thinking (*a*) in a theatre for the first time, (*b*) are being made to think in that theatre about peace, and (*c*) would be incommoded and put out by wit.

As I sat, reprieveless and resistless, listening to an argument that would not have taxed the brain of a fourteen-year-old, I found myself, when I was not admiring Miss Dorothy Dickson's beauty, debating three things. One. Why the British public invariably mistakes the unwitty for the profound. Two. Why, in a highly distinguished cast, only two actors, Messrs Ernest Thesiger and Deering Wells, were witty in themselves? Where, oh where, was Mr Denys Blakelock, the memory of whose Aristophanes in Mr Sherwood's *Acropolis* still makes me laugh! And where Mr Cecil Trouncer, who, with Messrs Thesiger and Anthony Bushell, kept Malvern marvelling at Mr Shaw's terzetto for Newton, Charles, and Kneller? Three. Thackeray's lecture needed a piano; Mr Linklater's cried out for full orchestra, principals, chorus, and corps de ballet. Offenbach, I reflected, is dead. But why, I asked myself, did not Mr Linklater jettison three-fourths of his dialogue, including the blank verse, and offer the remainder as libretto to Mr William Walton in his mood of *Façade*? In fairness to myself I have to say that I briefed myself for the defence in the belief that Mr Linklater's purpose, both on the air and in the theatre, has been didactic. If this is not so I apologize, resign my brief and go over to the prosecution, but first suggesting to my client that the next time he sets out to write a *bouffonnerie* he should have another look at what those admirable vaudevillists, Meilhac and Halévy, did in that line.

May 14, 1944

John Martin-Harvey

EVERY manager of spirit," says Montague, "needs a Beaucaire or two for his stand-by. Irving, when we fainted with excess of masterpieces, gave us *Faust* and *Ravenswood*." Forbes-Robertson, when he thought the provinces would not stand for Hamlet, Romeo, Othello, Macbeth, Henry Arthur Jones's Michael and Pinero's Lucas Cleeve, Shaw's Caesar and Dick Dudgeon, gave us *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*. There have been actors, of course, who have allowed the stand-by to become staple diet. It is the old story of the artistic conscience. The actor who is burdened with this will not be content to steep his soul in rubbish; it is your happy, compunctionless fellow who asks for nothing better than to stick his nose in the trough and wave his legs in the air.

That fine actor and fine spirit, John Martin-Harvey, whose death last week has grieved thousands, put this to me very succinctly one summer day in his beautiful garden at Sheen. He said, as nearly as I can remember, "Even star actors have families. The first duty of an actor who is not alone in the world is to put by a minimum sum against railway accidents and rainy days. His next duty is to defend that sum by appearing in the country and in popular plays. Why should I play Hamlet at £28 a night in London when the average provincial receipts for *Hamlet* are £177? Why should I inflict my Richard and my Oedipus on audiences clamouring for Sydney Carton and Lieutenant Reresby? At the same time every actor who loves his art admits the moral obligation to defy the box-office from time to time and produce the worth-while play." It was a Sunday, and I remember that we sat on into the gloaming, and presently went in to a candle-lit supper under the gracious presidency of his talented lady. Here Jack showed a glimpse of another side to his character—his sense of fun. Pointing to two rich and, indeed, over-ornate street lamps which stood at the foot of the staircase, he said that the bric-à-brac dealer had guaranteed them to have come direct from the Vendramini Palace on the Grand

Canal. "I did not tell him," said Jack, "that I recognized them as part of my production of *Othello*!"

Sydney Carton's words on the scaffold having passed into the language to the point at which they have become a standing joke, it would be idle to pretend that *The Only Way* is not the piece by which Martin-Harvey will be most generally remembered. And indeed there were beautiful things in it, including the scene in which Carton disclosed his intended self-sacrifice. This was a little back-water more deeply moving than the ostensible torrent to come. He was a master of reticence and spiritual melancholy. I remember slipping away from a Richter concert at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, to catch a glimpse of the last act of his *Hamlet*. It may well be that, as W. B. Yeats said, he delivered the "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" soliloquy "like a rabbit with a thunderbolt tied to its tail." Of his delivery of the "If it be now" speech I can only say that I have never heard words more beautifully spoken. There was about Harvey a wistfulness, a feyness, a power of appearing translated which Mrs Patrick Campbell put into her own language when, meeting him about to go on as Pelléas, luminous and unbodied, she widened her eyes and said, "You look like a great moth!" Pelleas told me this, sitting in that garden. He added with mock seriousness, "I owed everything in that part to my wig, which was made out of the hair which grows on the breast of the Tibetan yak!" He should, of course, have played Everyman in the original. Soon after the last war, he appeared in a retranslation of the German version of that masterpiece which he filled with something of Elgar's *Gerontius* quality. His acting, when Everyman was near to dying, had the hushed sweetness of that opening to the second part, so that one was reminded of the theme which symbolizes purification by the waters of Purgatory: "Softly and gently, dearly ransomed Soul." In Germany Everyman was played by a bull-necked Teuton. He would be. Harvey was all spirit, and when, at the end, the hooded figure of Death held forth his shadowy yet certain arms, it was a very pitiful, childlike figure that they enclosed. In later life his best performance was that of the Burgomaster in Maeterlinck's play. I remember asking him why he held his four fingers as though they were stuck together, with

the thumb a little apart. He said that he had observed this to be a characteristic of simple-minded persons, and that he wished to show the Burgomaster as heroic in his utter simplicity.

In the matter of physical qualifications Harvey had voice, mobile and expressive features, and a command of gesture. Alas, his own disposition tended to infuse something too much of the milk of human kindness into his acting, with the result that the full expression of malignity, envy, hate and the viler passions was denied to him. Was he a great actor? Perhaps not. Was he in the grand succession? Undoubtedly. Was he a great romantic with power to sway a crowded house? Ask those who saw him at his best! He went straight to the heart of his audience; he always moved me profoundly. And he had one quality which often your world-shaker may make shift to dispense with, but which is the basis of a great spirit. This is the power to postulate a world in which the standard of human thought and action is noble. The mean and the shoddy could not breathe his air. Some have called this urbanity; I should like to call it poetry. Harvey's world was noble, urbane and poetical. "To the young men and women of his day he was an intoxication and a passion, awakening half-formed desires, hidden longings and impulses, and secret enthusiasms, and wielding sway more imperiously over heart and sense and soul than any other man of his time did over the intellect or the reason of his disciples." That which was written of Swinburne may be fittingly said of the actor to whom we are saying good-bye. He was eighty, he had laboured for more than sixty years at the work nearest his heart, his reach blessedly exceeded his grasp, he brought happiness to two generations, he was beloved, and he is gone—there is nothing here but what may quiet us.

May 21, 1944

The English Way

A NIGHT IN VENICE. An Operetta. Words by Lesley Storm.

Lyrics by Dudley Glass. Music by Johann Strauss

Cambridge

THAT National Savings poet who recently bade us admire "the grandeur of Cumberland *dells*" would doubtless have enjoyed himself at this grandiloquent version of what is essentially a little thing. But this country has little taste for the small. It adores massed bands, and thinks two orchestras better than one but not so good as three, while its notion of a really slap-up string quartet is that it should take place in the Stadium at Wembley with a microphone attached to each desk and an amplifier at the top of each goal-post. Apply this to *A Night in Venice*, which Johann Strauss was content to conceive and execute as an opérette. Now what is an opérette? An opérette is a light mixture of wit and music to be enjoyed after a dinner at which the women have been pretty and the conversation sparkling.

Possibly you arrive after the first act, and possibly you forget to come back for the last. But that was never the way of the English, who hate to take their pleasures light-heartedly. It was all very well for Mr Wemmick to have his "Halloa! Here's a church! Let's go in!" because getting married, and to a Skiffins, is no great shakes. But the modern Englishman is not born who will exclaim, "Hello! Here's a theatre! Let's drop in!" Still less must you expect him to say, "Oh, hell! I've had enough of this. Let's drop out." Decency and his economic sense alike forbid.

Strauss's orchestration? Pooh! The chap was a foreigner! And what can foreigners be expected to know about orchestration? Wherefore we have poor old Johann Strauss, who, being an Austrian, could hardly know a harp from a trombone, brought by Mr Erich Korngold up to British standard. (My friend, Mr Constant Lambert, tells me that in the lighter school the three great masters of orchestration upon whom no finger should ever be laid are

Delibes, Offenbach, and Johann Strauss. And I say, Yes, but have they the lush, treacly, palais-de-danse Orientalism dear to the British heart?) Now, having assembled an orchestra bursting with harps and trombones it is obviously uneconomic to use it all up on one trumpery opérette. Wherefore interpolation is piled on interpolation—the *Thousand and One Nights* Waltz, the *Acceleration* Waltz, the *Artists' Life* Waltz, the *Bei Uns z' Haus* Waltz, the Pizzicato Polka and so forth. Then why not a ballet? By all means. The difference between grand opera and opérette is the difference between grand nonsense and little nonsense, with ballet common to both. Few operatic composers have been able to resist these gyratory orgies in the most improbable settings and times—Egyptian deserts, Swiss plateaux, the Elysian Fields, the night before the massacre of St Bartholomew and half an hour after stout Vasco da Gama has stood far from silent on that peak in Africa.

My favourite description of the balletic phenomenon occurs in Halévy's *Madame et Monsieur Cardinal*:

Les demoiselles du corps de ballet dansaient, autour de Marguerite, la valse de la kermesse; et les dames des chœurs, alignées contre les décors, les bras ballants, avec un air d'ennui et de résignation, chantaient:

Que la valse nous entraîne!
Faisons retentir la plaine
Du bruit de nos chansons!
Valsons!
Je respire à peine!
Ah! quel plaisir! *etc., etc.*

Translate? I would scorn the haction, as Mrs Cluppins said. Besides, the meaning should be clear enough. Who does not know those wilting dressmaker's assistants listlessly pirouetting under the eyes of asthmatics dejectedly demanding transport on the wings of song? "Que la valse nous entraîne!" Indeed yes, since the only alternative is the dusting of the Opera House chairs.

But to return to the Cambridge. I am inclined to think that the best thing in the present production is the ballet, if only for the reason that at least nobody speaks. Never, I think, has English humour seemed more pitifully bankrupt than it did on Wednesday

evening. "Annina is in the Duke's clutches," says some one. And the funny man replies, "I didn't know the Duke went about on crutches." "Anyhow she's alone with him," says the first speaker. "If she's with him how can she be alone?" objects the comic fellow. The acting? In one of my favourite Damon Runyon stories there is a character called Ambrose Hammer, who is what is called a dramatic critic by trade.

Ambrose's pieces are very interesting indeed, as he loves to heave the old harpoon into actors if they do not act to suit him, and as it will take a combination of Katherine Cornell, Jimmy Durante and Lillian Gish to really suit Ambrose, he is generally in there harpooning away very good.

Now this Ambrose goes to the Club Soudan, where he watches "an Arabian acrobatic dancer turn flip-flops, and one thing and another, although personally," Ambrose says, "I do not think she is any more Arabian than Miss Ethel Barrymore." Now personally I do not think that Messrs Dennis Noble and Jerry Verno are any more Venetian than "Monsewer" Eddie Gray. But they do very well what it is in their power to do, though I think the first mistakes the Cambridge Theatre for the Albert Hall, and the material with which the second must divert us is the ghastliest ever devised. As the Duke, Mr Henry Wendon looks more ducal and sings, I doubt not, better than most dukes. The principal female part is entrusted to Miss Daria Bayan. Now this Miss Bayan is a coloratura soprano, and much better at that than most of the Technicoloratura sopranos I hear on the screen. But I repeat, the best of the show is the ballet. For though ballet dancers may fall flat, there is this to be said for them, that they can never sing sharp.

May 28, 1944

An Unfavourite Play

WHY is *The Winter's Tale* so little popular? Some people have alleged the gap in time between the third and fourth acts. On the theory, shall we say, that devouring Time blunts more things than lions' paws—to wit, theatrical interest. It was Shakespeare's failure to live up to the dramatic principles laid down by Mr Curdle which led the commentator Pope to entertain doubts of this play's genuineness. Hazlitt quickly disposed of Pope by saying that what slips or blunders there were in the play did not prove it not to be Shakespeare, "for he was as like to fall into them as anybody; but we do not know anybody but himself who could produce the beauties." That fine Shakespearean critic, Quiller-Couch, put the case against rather more sympathetically when he wrote:

Shakespeare, master of resources though he was, could hit on no device to avoid . . . having to present, in an action of some three hours, the children Marina and Perdita first as babes exposed, helpless as innocent, to the surge of the sea or the beasts of the forest, anon as maidens grown up to reunite parental hearts long astray . . .

But "Q" possessed in addition to his sympathy great store of sanity and shrewdness, and could on occasion get down to the gist of the matter as forthrightly as Hazlitt or as bluntly as Johnson. By the way, if I were asked for my favourite stroke of Shakespearean criticism it would be one of Samuel's notes to *The Merchant of Venice*. Lorenzo asks who comes with Portia, and Stephano replies: "None but the holy hermit and her maid." Whereupon Johnson growls, "I do not perceive the use of this hermit, of whom nothing is seen or heard afterwards." "Q" dismissed the bear—I mean the one in *The Winter's Tale*—with the remark, "The bear is a naughty superfluity."

While "Q" was prepared to overlook the antics of Father Time he could not forgive Shakespeare's failure to give warning of the

element of jealousy in Leontes' make-up. This has puzzled many apologists, some of whom have suggested that Shakespeare lacked the time and room to develop the change in the man. (I shall make the point presently that there is no change.) "Q" would have nothing to do with this.

The Winter's Tale, like *Cymbeline*, was written for the theatre: Doctor Simon Forman's diary records that he witnessed a performance at the Globe on May 15, 1611. A short while before, he had witnessed a performance of *Cymbeline* at the same house. If, then, for *Cymbeline* Shakespeare could be allowed a space of time correspondent with 169 pages of print [in the Temple Shakespeare], why in *The Winter's Tale* had he to compress his action within a space less by 22 pages—or between one-eighth and one-seventh? We are dealing with workmanship, and this is an eminently practical question, as any playwright will tell us. Shakespeare *had* time, or could have found time, to make Leontes' jealousy far more credible than it is. I maintain that he bungled it.

Here I want to break a lance. As I understand, the complaint is that we, the spectators, are not warned of Leontes' jealousy, and the argument then proceeds: Camillo and Antigonus having sounded their master's nature must have detected his weakness. Yet Camillo and all the courtiers are thunderstruck at what to them is sudden revelation. Hermione is no fool, yet she never suspects her husband's master-weakness. At this point "Q" writes: "Then, I say, if neither the courtiers nor Hermione have guessed, *a fortiori* we are not prepared. I ask any candid reader of the play if the surprise of Leontes' insane jealousy does not hit him, as it hits every one on the stage, like a blow on the face." Not me! I suggest that there is confusion here, and that while Shakespeare did not prepare the other characters he took the greatest possible care to prepare the audience. And as early as the second scene of the first act. Let us overhear Leontes:

(*Aside*) Too hot, too hot!

To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.
I have tremor cordis on me: my heart dances;

AN UNFAVOURITE PLAY

But not for joy; not joy. . . .
But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers,
As now they are, and making practised smiles,
As in a looking-glass, and then to sigh, as 'twere
The mort o' the deer; O, that is entertainment
My bosom likes not, nor my brows! Mamillius,
Art thou my boy?

If this is not 'planting' the jealousy *motif* then I must go to school again.

In any case I find nothing in the points already raised to affect the public taste. I don't believe that an audience is worried by unexpected Third Murderers, Hermits of whom no more is heard, frisking Time, improbable bears, and sea-coasts as far removed from their proper place as a modern beauty's eyebrows. I think the reason *The Winter's Tale* is unpopular is that Hermione talks too much. A genius in another school explained why "a doll who is called Silk" should be so popular with the customers at Mindy's as follows, viz. and to wit:

She seldom sticks in her oar, except maybe to ask a question; naturally a doll who is willing to listen instead of wishing to gab herself is bound to be popular because if there is anything most citizens hate and despise it is a gabby doll.

Hermione while she has the chance is one of the gabbiest of Shakespeare's dolls, and her idiom is the most difficult Shakespeare ever used:

Cram's with praise, and make's
As fat as tame things: one good deed dying tongueless
Slaughters a thousand waiting upon that.
Our praises are our wages: you may ride's
With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs ere
With spur we heat an acre.

Yes: if there is anything most playgoers hate and despise it is a gabby doll who gabs like Hermione.

June 4, 1944

A Novelist's Play

THE LAST OF SUMMER. By Kate O'Brien
Phoenix

EVERYBODY must have heard somebody say at some time, "This calls for a celebration. Let's dine in town and go to a theatre." Nobody has ever heard anybody say, "We must celebrate this. What about dinner at home and a good read?" The essence of the theatre is excitement shared in company, and, moreover, excitement packed into something under three hours. What will A do next? What will B say to that? Whereas your novel-reader prefers to be alone, is enchanted when the actions of A and the allocutions of B are interrupted by descriptions of scenery running into pages, and deems no book that can be read under a week worth taking out of the library. Take another aspect. Consider Walkley on the subject of dramatized Jane:

The reader's imagination acts . . . in obedient correspondence with the novelist's and sees the people of her creation in the proportions and perspective she assigns to them. In the theatre this correspondence is upset in two ways. First, there is the real personality and presence of the actor. . . . Secondly, there is the rearrangement, cutting down, foreshortening of the novel, inevitable in the process of transfer to the stage.

At this point I shall admit that I have not read Miss O'Brien's story.

The theatre is impatient of over-complication. Is Hannah one of those mothers who are possessive to the point at which possessiveness becomes a disease? One thinks so. At least, she is possessive to this point, that when Dr O'Bryne proposes a match between his daughter, Norrie, with whom goes a very useful dowry of £10,000, and Hannah's son, Tom, who is running the family's impoverished Irish estate, Hannah refuses, because she is that kind of mother. In *The Silver Cord* the late Sidney Howard made an excellent play out of just this and no more. But now Angèle

appears on Miss O'Brien's scene. And who is Angèle? Well, it seems that Angèle's father was one of three brothers who years ago courted Hannah, a proud village beauty and the daughter of the local draper. And then, for some vague reason, Angèle's father turned over Hannah to his brother, and married a French actress, and by her begat Angèle, who is a French film star, and has come to Ireland to make the acquaintance of the folks at home. At once she sweeps her first cousin, Tom, off his feet, but Hannah won't hear of their marriage: *not because of her possessive mania*, but because she has never forgiven Angèle's father. Which is like making Capulet reject Romeo, not because he is a Montague, but because, twenty years ago, he, Capulet, had been jilted by the young man's mother. As though this were not enough Miss O'Brien must needs lay her scene in the summer of 1939 with all the ensuing implications and complications. War being imminent, Angèle wants to return to Paris, and Tom, very reasonably, wants to go with her. Whereupon Hannah starts her campaign of lying. Doesn't Tom see that Angèle, while being enamoured of his, Tom's, torso and biceps, is spiritually more drawn to his brother Martin? Then Martin takes a hand. Doesn't Angèle see that an Irish bog is no place for a French film star, and that life at Waterpark House under his mother's baleful eye will be hell? There is a great deal of this and a lot about patriotism and Angèle's duty to her art, and a whole lot more about Martin joining the Air Force and Hannah's daughter Jo going into a convent. Finally Angèle goes back to Paris, and Tom goes back to his brood mares and foals, and Hannah is left making up her mind that half a son and a fat dowry—for Norrie is still on tap as it were—is better than a whole son and no cash.

I am quite prepared to believe that in the novel all this is entirely convincing. My feeling in the theatre was that none of it was real. To begin with, I didn't believe in Miss Fay Compton's Junoesque Hannah in the sense in which I believe in Sara Allgood's Juno. I am told that in the novel the draper's daughter is at pains to ape gentility; what I saw was an exquisite and accomplished actress giving an exquisite and accomplished display. I should have been astonished if Hannah had known a heifer from a goat; I should not

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have been surprised if at any moment Miss Compton had overwhelmed her niece-by-marriage in a set speech of twenty-four of Racine's best Alexandrines beginning

Vous ne démentez point une race funeste;
Oui, vous êtes le sang d'Atrée et de Thyeste.

The slanging match at the end was fine.

Conversely, I did not feel that Miss Margaret Johnston's Angèle had ever been nearer Paris than Elstree, while recognizing this newcomer's youth and charm and talent. Mr Geoffrey Toone's Tom looked to me the last person likely to be tied to his mother's apron-strings. I felt that Mr Hugh Burden's Martin would have found the wittiest excuses for not joining the Air Force, while the idea that that strapping colleen, Miss Hazel Terry's Jo, should contemplate getting her to a nunnery struck me as just nonsense. Miss Ada Reeve put rather more acting into a small part than it would hold, and lastly, that exquisite player, Mr Fred O'Donovan, drifted in from time to time to see if there was anything to act, and finding there wasn't, drifted out again.

June 11, 1944

“Zero Hour” Again

ZERO HOUR. By Ronald Millar
Duke of York's

THE LAST OF MRS CHEYNEY. (Revival.) By Frederick Lonsdale
Savoy

THE fate of *Zero Hour* may well decide whether there is, or is not, a public in London for a play on a subject which is exercising the entire civilized world and a few of its uncivilized corners also—the basic rightness or wrongness of dictatorship. I should have been more satisfied, perhaps, about the validity of this test if it had been found possible to retain Mr Eric Portman as the would-be Dictator of this country. Mr Walter Fitzgerald would perfectly enact the Chairman of the L.C.C.; he totally lacks the daemonism essential to this play's fanatic for Hitlerism. The play, as a play, does not exist. All the characters except three—the German airman, the madman, and the boy to whom he gives himself away—could be dispensed with. Everywhere good argument, it is nowhere good theatre. And as argument it has given me an idea. Why not produce a real play of the theatre on the subject of war and glory? I have in mind a piece which the Germans hold to be a tragedy and which would supply English playgoers with the key to the tragic mess the Germans have got themselves and the world into. I suggest an up-to-date version in English of Otto Erich Hartleben's *Rosenmontag*, which I saw performed by German actors in this country in 1921.

Allow me to recapitulate the story. Hans, a young German officer, has a mistress, Gertrude. The Major, for reasons of his own, forces Hans to break off the liaison by boasting that he also has been the girl's lover. When Hans, after a nervous breakdown, rejoins his regiment he appears as the fiancé of a young woman belonging to a respectable family. The Colonel approves the engagement, but extracts from Hans the promise that he will never see his mistress again. And then accident brings about a meeting

between the two, and Gertrude begs for a hearing. Hans weakly consents to receive her in his room in barracks, and becomes convinced that the charges brought against her are false. The Major, now breaking in upon them, is told that he is a liar and a scoundrel. Whereupon he takes his thoroughly German revenge. He will reveal to the Colonel that Hans has broken his word. Hans cannot face this and decides to blow his brains out. Before doing so he sits down to commit his sentimental soul to paper, including some verses describing two lovers found dead in one another's arms. Gertrude, happening upon this poem, knows what she has to do.

J. T. Grein wrote:

To understand how intimately this play is associated with the German national character one must have lived in one of those garrison towns where the lieutenant is a god. One must have lived, I say, among these proud men with whom honour is dearer than life, and to whom life without honour—honour as a German officer understands it—is not worth living.

I would supplement this by underlining Hartleben's point. This is that to the German officer honour consists not in comporting himself honourably or decently or humanly towards the world in general, but *in being a German officer*, and as such freed of all obligations except to his regiment. Every German who sees Hartleben's piece leaves the theatre holding it to be inescapable tragedy bound up with the principles of German honour. Were this an English play every Englishman seeing it would leave the theatre determined to recast British notions of military honour so that such nonsense could not occur again. The point of producing this play in England now? It would give this nation a better understanding of the real Germany. It would shout as loudly as the theatre can shout that what we have to defeat is not only armies in the German field but maggots in the German brain.

Mr Lonsdale's brilliant comedy revives after nineteen years with as much sparkle as a bottle of champagne that has been lying open in its bucket for no more than nineteen minutes. The wine may be Quex's old Félix Poubelle, Carte d'Or, but the wit is the author's own, and none of it shows any trace of cork. True to life? Who

cares? Of course Clapham shop-girls who are ready to steal pearl necklaces at £50,000 a time are not going to put their "niceness" before five years in chokey, especially when they have a "pash" for the man who can send them to gaol or keep them out of it. Neither, one thinks, do they tear up £10,000 cheques in return for an incriminating letter. Nor do they tear up such letters. (If they do and return the pieces, it is only because they have had the original photographed.) But again, who cares? The plot has any amount of ingenious twists, and the dialogue gets headier and headier as the play proceeds. To say that the piece is good theatre means that it has plenty of good acting parts. The number of such parts in this comedy is, by my reckoning, seven. (In the original production there were eight, but we must not expect another Frank Lawton to appear suddenly from nowhere and make a hit in the part of a junior footman with a bare dozen lines or so to speak.) The present seven performances will stand any reasonable comparison with those that went before—Mesdames Seyler and Scudamore have only to speak and, as Stevenson said of Elizabeth Bennet, I am at their knees. And Messrs James Dale, Anthony Shaw and Austin Trevor are good enough for any company.

I am not persuaded that anything so uncommon as this Mrs Cheyney ever bloomed in Clapham, but there my criticism of Miss Coral Browne's performance ends. It is gay and amusing, and has odd moments of sincerity. In the matter of Mr Jack Buchanan's Lord Dilling criticism just doesn't begin. It wouldn't know where to, since the character, as now performed, bears no relation whatever to the dipsomaniac cad that Mr Lonsdale drew and du Maurier portrayed. But then it isn't meant to. Mr Buchanan is content to be the modern Jack Bannister of whom Lamb wrote that he and Dicky Suett "had the fortune to be more of personal favourites with the town than any actors before or after." Jack's Dilling is "beloved for his sweetness, good nature and moral pretensions." That's O.K. by me, and so would Macbeth be, played along the same lines, provided the actor were our Jack.

June 18, 1944

Ideas and the Critic

At a dinner party the other evening a man whom I shall call X said, "From the beginning of time the critics have always fought against the play of ideas." Another man, Y, said, "I don't think I can agree with you. But we have got a dramatic critic here, Z. Why not ask him?" On being appealed to, Z said, "I should like notice of that question. Kindly pass the port." X's staggering pronouncement can only mean that the public has always had a natural inclination towards the intellectual drama and would have given rein to this inclination had it not been for the critics shooing them away from the theatres where such plays were performed and urging the superior attractions of dramas of the order of *Up in Mabel's Room* or *Getting Gertie's Garter*.

"Il faut arriver de l'Afrique pour avoir cet idée-là," says Olivier de Jalin in Dumas's *Le Demi-Monde*. I have been cudgelling my brains to imagine in what continent X can have picked up an extraordinary notion which drives at the very heart of the profession to which I have the honour to belong. I shall postulate that the two greatest 'intellectual' playwrights of modern times are Ibsen and Shaw, and that four of the best dramatic critics of the last fifty years have been G. B. S., William Archer, A. B. Walkley and C. E. Montague. I propose in what follows to examine the attitude of these four critics, one of whom happens to be an intellectual dramatist, to two great masters of the play of ideas, one of whom happens to have been a great dramatic critic.

Ibsen. I maintain against all comers that every essay in *Our Theatres in the Nineties* puts or tends to put the case for the great Norwegian, and I deny that *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* can by any stretch of intellectual perversity be interpreted as the case against. Take Archer. I cull from the article on *Little Eyolf*: "Where does the loveliness of this play come in? Partly, of course, in the consummate technical mastery of the first act, the thrilling and the tense dramatic vitality of the whole." Hardly an attack,

one would think. And all those arduous, loving, and indefatigable translations of the plays—were they demolitionary? Walkley?

There is an impressionist in one of Mr Henry James's novels, whose *animula vagula blandula* is summed up in this way: "I drift, I float, my feelings direct me—if such a life as mine may be said to have a direction. Where there's anything to feel I try to be there!" Well, dramatic criticism just now is impressionist; it is drifting and floating. There is always something to feel in the playhouse, when Ibsen is being played, and we try to be there.

However, I will be frank and admit that A. B. W. is not a very good witness for me; it was perhaps too much to expect the urbane lover of James, Jane, and Proust to take the Nordic hedgehog to his bosom. Montague? "Ibsen was the one man of his time who, having something of moment to say, was also able to say it through plays that took life when acted." I see no destructive intention here.

Now let us consider Shaw the intellectual playwright. Archer? To be frank, Archer was scared stiff by the colossal sense of responsibility behind the Shavian larkishness—unless, of course, it was the other way round—and therefore could not do full justice to the plays. This time Walkley is better. *The Doctor's Dilemma* caught A. B. W. in the mood in which he liked himself best, the mood of "finding the arguments for and against equally good; of being, in fine, multilateral, *ondoyant et divers*." The end of his notice of this most theatrical of all the author's plays is, "Stimulating and diverting, occasionally distressing, now and then bewildering. O philosopher! O humorist! you say with gratitude. And then you whisper, with a half-sigh, O Pierrot! O Faun!" Would such a notice put the ordinary playgoer off? Aw shucks! Montague went all out for a talent which he likened to an express train rushing through a station and dragging the spectator's mind behind it like a paper bag.

Obviously X would not have dreamed of bolstering up his argument by drawing upon apprentices and whipper-snappers, reporters like Clement Scott, gossip-writers and vulgarians wilfully closing their minds to ideas. His misconception must have been based upon something. Casting round, I recover part of a sentence by

Sir Max Beerbohm: "The bad play written exquisitely by a poet, or thoughtfully by a philosopher, or strenuously by a propagandist. . . ." I suggest that X has lent too sympathetic an ear to some playwriting friend who, having put heart and soul into a propagandistic drama only to find it coldly received by the critics, has jumped to the conclusion that what the critics disapproved of was his ideas. (From "his" ideas to ideas in general is, of course, the smallest of steps.) Hear Montague once more: "Many dramatists never grasp all that the special conditions of theatrical representation mean and demand. Their plays remain essentially novels, or lyric or didactic poems, or pamphlets, or Socratic dialogues." Let the position be reaffirmed. A dramatic critic is a critic of drama first, last, and all the time. That critic is right who lavishes praise on a brilliantly executed farce about a Scrap of Paper while rejecting a White Paper which, admirable in itself, does not begin to be a play.

When I had written the last word—and here I concede something to my friend X—I looked again into Max's *Around Theatres*. The book opened at the 1908 revival of Shaw's *Arms and the Man*:

I am quite sure that if I had been in the Avenue Theatre on that historic first-night fourteen years ago I should have been very indignant against the whole affair. I should have heartily agreed, next morning, with the elderly men who at that time monopolized dramatic criticism on the daily papers. . . .

In other words, since Z has been appealed to he gives it as his decision that whereas X is wrong from 1890 onwards he may well be right about that earlier period in our theatrical history when there was no intellectual drama to elicit the sympathies of the critic either way.

June 25, 1944

First in his Kind

MR ERIC CLEMENT-SCOTT has objected to my calling his father a reporter. But it was owing to the kindness of a daughter of Clement Scott that I became the possessor of a unique volume of early nineteenth-century dramatic criticism which had belonged to the well-known critic—a volume which now rests in the Manchester City Library in the room devoted to literary treasures. From which it will be gathered that I am the last person to denigrate a considerable figure and remarkable man. But I do not withdraw “reporter,” and I shall entrench myself behind Mr Shaw who, some time in the ’nineties, wrote, “Mr Clement Scott is not the first of the great dramatic critics; but he is the first of the great dramatic reporters. . . . The excellence of Mr Scott’s criticisms lies in their integrity as expressions of the warmest personal feeling and nothing else.” But the expression of warm personal feeling unbacked by anything else is not criticism; if it were, the schoolboy’s “Euclid is all rot” would be first-class geometrical criticism.

Sir Max Beerbohm, writing about the same time, said, “Mr Scott is generally in the wrong (as must be any man who regards Tom Robertson as a terminus), but he is never dully in the wrong.” Now hear William Archer:

Mr Scott represents to a nicety the average middle-class Englishman. He found the stage, in the ’sixties, beneath his intellectual level, and sought to raise it. From ’seventy to ’ninety it exactly came up to his intellectual and artistic requirements, and he was happy. In ’ninety it took a fresh start and left him behind; and he now shrieks to it to come back and “mark time,” for he cannot follow it into “an atmosphere that is mephitic.”

I find it significant that G. B. S., Max, and Archer should agree about a colleague considered so important by the public of his day that when in the morning he damned a production of *A Society*

Butterfly based on Dumas's *Françillon*, the author Robert Buchanan appeared that night on the stage, read Scott's notice to the audience, and made an impassioned speech in reply.

In 1893 Scott returned from a visit to America to find that *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* had captured the town. He had read about Pinero's new vein, and had written an article in the *North American Review* in which he said, "When it is proved to me that the public endorses the new drama, then I shall lay down my pen and quit the field." Let us see what sort of drama Scott himself was endorsing. Of a little piece called *Good-bye*, produced in the same year as *Tanqueray* by a young man calling himself Seymour Hicks, he wrote:

His animal spirits carry him away, and he is apt to kick over the traces. But that is a fault easily to be forgiven in this bored and *blasé* and jaundiced age, when, for the most part, our young authors write like miserable, little, wizened old men and pose as Tottenham Court Road Voltaires! These sickly, and I regret to say to me personally sickening, little old young gentlemen will probably fall foul of manly, boyish, natural young Seymour Hicks. . . . They will squirt at him their acrid and acid and venomous juices, and they will beg him to poison his heroine and asphyxiate his lover, and urge him to put a pistol in the hands of his husband-hero and bespatter the drawing-room carpet with his brains; but, good, honest, boyish Mr Seymour Hicks, do not listen to the voice of these charmers, charm they never so wisely. You are on the right tack, Mr Seymour Hicks—believe me, you are on the right tack. The women are with you, and the women are the real influence of the playhouse. The people are with you, and the people will never desert you if you delight them.

And now perhaps one begins to see why Scott distrusted the plays of Ibsen, which he called the "Drama of the Dustbin." (Walkley did not take easily to Ibsen but recognized him as a great master, whereas Scott regarded him as a purveyor of moral poison.) Scott's recognition that Ibsen's plays were suburban was a first-class piece of penetration; his mind was not capable of grasping, and

being staggered by, the fact that plays smelling of yesterday's cold mutton were the dramatic wonder of a new age. On the plane on which Scott's mind moved he was a great craftsman. He was a master of fluency, and after the fall of the curtain would write against the clock an enormous number of words; sometimes very good and very long words. Hear him on Ellen Terry in something pretty and unimportant:

It was not the memory of Undine, or Beatrice, or Elaine, or Vivien; it was not after reading Fouqué, or Dante, or Tennyson; it was not after diving deep into medieval romance or modern poetry, that Mr Alfred C. Calmour sat down to write his pretty story of *The Amber Heart*. It must have been after studying very closely and very surely that curious compound of childlike innocence and womanly tenderness, that strange amalgam of German mysticism and Italian fervour, the elf-like weirdness and picturesque idiosyncrasy of the one actress of our time. . . .

And so on and so forth. Yes, Scott had the gift of something for which "gab" is too low a word. As against this there were times when he could get down to describing the plot of a play as matter-of-factly as a man will do a job of plumbing. When he was in this mood he would write you about a drama as a man would write about a new Fire of London, telling you where it began and ended and what happened in between. "The lot of critics is to be remembered by what they failed to understand," wrote George Moore. As a dramatic critic with the capacity to handle a new intellectual movement, Scott has long been forgotten; as a dramatic reporter with a power of making the plain thing memorable he was a genius. Nobody like Scott to tell you how Irving walked and talked, how Ellen Terry looked, and what the plays were like with which they mitigated the arduousness of Shakespearean study.

July 2, 1944

An Odd Play

MADELEINE. Translated from the French of Jean-Jacques
Bernard by J. Leslie Frith
Lyric, Hammersmith

OPENING Walkley's *Playhouse Impressions* at an essay on Sardou, I find allusions to La Bruyère, Scribe, Zola, Poe, Diderot, Goldsmith, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Balzac, Molière and Augier. Why this luxuriance? Because Walkley had nothing to say about Sardou. I open again at his account of an early and not very good farce by Pinero, and I read about the strange sounds which Edward Terry was wont to traverse in the brief course of three acts.

He has been called "an animated clarinet," but that is a wholly inadequate description of a voice which ranges from the squeaks of the piccolo and the ear-piercing fife, through the whole range of the wood-wind, down to the buzz of the bassoon. The peculiar danger, of course, of such an organ is that it sometimes tempts its possessor to illustrate the old saw of *vox et praeterea nihil*; and Mr Terry has not always resisted this temptation. He did not, for instance, in his penultimate part, that of Dick Phenyl in *Sweet Lavender*. But as Montague Joliffe he is something more than an oboe in trousers.

But then Sardou and Pinero were easy game for Walkley, who used them as pegs for word-spinning. Confronted by a difficult play A. B. W. was a different writer altogether. "Ibsen's *Lady from the Sea* is understood to have been the result of a holiday visit to the seaside." There's directness for you! Farewell to florescence.

Taking the hint from Walkley I shall say that M. Jean-Jacques Bernard's *Madeleine* is no case for what Jeames de la Pluche called "lacy ally and easy plesntry." Indeed, if I knew enough words of one syllable this article would be made out of nothing else. For the reason that, frankly, I don't know what this play is about. Let me put down some of my guesses. Madeleine, a well-to-do young

French girl *de nos jours* is suffering from a father-fixation with this added difficulty, that she doesn't quite know who her father was. Her mother has had many lovers, and one gathers that she does not consider her day entirely over. It seems that Madame Landier wants to get Madeleine off her hands, and we agree that she is not the first mother to find the presence of an attractive grown-up daughter, shall we say, incommoding. She advances the usual French reasons for a *mariage de convenance*, the only stumbling-block being the fact that the intended husband, Robert, is a bespectacled prig. Madeleine tells her mother that she will marry anybody in Paris within reason, but that this excludes Robert. And then she catches sight of Daniel, the fiancé of her foster-sister Germaine, a husky ex-sailor who has taken his fill of Indo-China and has come to do odd jobs about Madame Landier's house. This is the *coup de foudre*, and Madeleine, to protect herself from her own temperament, announces that she will marry Robert. So far so good, though it hardly needs M. Bernard's name on the programme to tell us that poor Daniel would be better off in a den of famished lionesses than in the same house with Germaine, Madeleine, and Mamma.

In the second act we find Madeleine married to Robert and Daniel nicely settled with Germaine. But Madeleine is a Nanette *à rebours*; if she can't be happy she isn't going to let anybody else be happy. Since she cannot enjoy Daniel neither shall Germaine, to which end she arranges for Germaine's husband to spend three days alone with her extremely attractive maid at her mother's country house. The inevitable happens, and Germaine commits suicide. There is a violent scene in which Daniel reproaches himself to Madeleine, and Madeleine screams that it is she and not Daniel who has brought about Germaine's death. And now we come to the third act. "Blind, blind, blind," said Betsey Trotwood, trying to open David Copperfield's eyes to what was the matter with Agnes. I hesitate to think what phrase that vigorous old lady would have applied to the amount of cecity in Madeleine's family, none of whom suspects that the cause of her *malaise* is the able-bodied ex-matelot. "Take me back to Paris," she cries to Robert, who very patiently explains that according to the latest psychopaths to

fly from something is actually to seek it. "Budge!" says Madeleine. "Budge not!" says Robert. Whereupon Madeleine decides to kill herself with the paper-knife in the moonlight and at one o'clock in the morning. She is interrupted by Mamma going the rounds to lock up. Taking Madeleine by the shoulder, Madame Landier gives her a good shaking and tells her to stop behaving like her father. "But who was my father?" queries Madeleine. "The one you always thought, dear," says Mamma, "the man I married. I shouldn't have done so had it not been that . . ." "Dear Mamma," says Madeleine, "I quite understand. Now go to bed and leave me to lock up." Mamma having said "Just as you please" and departing, Madeleine opens the French window, and falls upon the ex-sailor's bronzed and stalwart bosom.

What the play needs is a fourth act in which to explain how the fact that her parents were lovers before they were married justifies Madeleine in breaking her marriage vow. "Dear Pamela," wrote Joseph Andrews to his sister, "if it had not been so great a lady, I should have thought Madam had had a mind to me." A fourth act to this play would have shown Daniel resolving Joseph's doubts. The piece has one superb performance by Miss Mary Hinton, and another by Miss Pamela Brown, about whom I shall be content to echo a colleague's "She stands higher than any of her generation for flashes of revealing fire." I leave this play wishing I knew what Walkley would have said about it. "*Madeleine* is understood to be the result of a visit of inspection paid by the author to a Home for Insatiables"? Perhaps.

July 9, 1944

The Unimportance of Being Earnest

PERUSAL of the new edition of Oscar Wilde's plays suggests that it would be interesting if somebody would write a History of Twaddle. It did not exist in Restoration comedy. Here are two ladies in Otway's *The Soldier's Fortune* talking anything but twaddle:

SYLVIA: Indeed, such another charming animal as your consort, Sir Davy, might do much with me; 'tis an unspeakable blessing to lie all night by a horse-load of diseases; a beastly, unsavoury, old, groaning, grunting, wheezing wretch, that smells of the grave he's going to already. From such a curse, and hair-cloth next my skin, good Heaven deliver me!

LADY DUNCE: Thou mistak'st the use of a husband, Sylvia; they are not meant for bedfellows; heretofore, indeed, 'twas a fulsome fashion, to lie o' nights with a husband; but the world's improved, and customs altered.

This may not be the essence of niceness, but, as Wilde's Lady Stutfield would say, it is very, very far from twaddle. No, the Restoration dramatists kept their fustian for their tragedies. What I want to know is the date at which the *grossièretés* of the Sylvias and the Lady Dunces gave place to the petrifying nonsense of Wilde's Lady Windermers and Mrs Arbuthnots. The curtain has not risen three minutes on *Lady Windermere's Fan* before Lady W. is saying:

Nowadays people seem to look on life as a speculation. It is not a speculation. It is a sacrament. Its ideal is Love. Its purification is sacrifice.

One wonders how W. ever came to marry this walking Manual of Moral Precept. As for Mrs Arbuthnot, it is as though somebody had piled Amanda Ros on the top of Marie Corelli. Her outpourings are not a part of human utterance, though they were the normal

stage utterance of the period. Let me take something from Pinero's *The Profligate*, written just before the Wilde period. Hear Hugh Murray:

Renshaw, do you imagine there is no autumn in the life of a profligate? What of the time when those wild oats thrust their ears through the very seams of the floor trodden by the wife whose respect you have learned to covet! In your house or in the open, the scent of the mildewed grain always in your nostrils, and in your ears no music but the wind's rustle amongst the fat sheaves! And, worst of all, your wife's heart a granary bursting with the load of shame your profligacy has stored there!

It would be interesting to find out who was the first playwright to blow this rubbish off the English stage, the first to learn from Ibsen how people really talked. It would be equally interesting to know whether Wilde had ever seen any Ibsen. I cannot think he did. Hear Doctor Rank:

I don't know whether, in your part of the country, you have people who go rooting and sniffing around in search of moral rottenness—whose policy it is to fill good places with men of tainted character whom they can keep under their eye and in their power?

How could any dramatist with this in mind have written such impossible twaddle as that uttered by Wilde's peccant politician:

It is when we are wounded by our own hands, or by the hands of others, that love should come to cure us—else what use is love at all? All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon.

How and why did Wilde write this preposterous trash? How? With his tongue in his cheek. Why? Because the theatre of the day demanded it. The truth as I see it is that Wilde had a Skimpollian non-interest in, and indifference to, the major virtues. I do not believe that he ever had a serious thought or a serious emotion. I find the whole of his work, except when he is being witty, riddled with pretentiousness and affectation. Yet, it is true that, as he said of himself, he "summed up all systems in a phrase and existence in

an epigram." A year or two ago I found something German in my mail. Opening it distastefully I read:

Es scheint meine zu sein. Ja, da ist der Riss, den sie durch den Sturz eines Gower-Street Omnibus in jüngeren und glücklicheren Tagen davon trug. Hier ist der Fleck am Futter, der durch Explosion eines alkoholfreien Getränkes in Leamington entstand.

Now my German is not very good. But the words "Gower Street Omnibus" struck a chord. I could guess that *alkoholfreies Getränk* means a temperance beverage; and "Explosion in Leamington" clinched the matter. I must be looking at Wilde's masterpiece. And so I was. It was the German translation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with the title *Ernst Sein!* I found in this an additional scene in which Algernon is arrested for debt, a scene which George Alexander cut. It is not Wilde at his best, but it is still full of that easy wit of which he was the incomparable master. Hear the solicitor: "Time presses, Mr Moncrieff. We must present ourselves at Holloway Gaol at four o'clock; after that it is difficult to obtain admission." I find here a brilliancy and a suavity and a patina of which our modern fabricators of wisecracks know nothing. Let readers try it for themselves. Take any subject—say, your infant prodigy. "An infant prodigy possesses neither the maturity of childhood nor the inexperience of age." "An infant prodigy is one whose second childhood precedes its first." Well, that's the best I can do. And how forced and lame these neo-Wildisms are in comparison with Algernon's remark about his friend Bunbury, also in the deleted scene—"Late suppers are the only thing the dear fellow's doctor allows him." We have had mighty fine jesters since the 'nineties, but with the exception of "Saki" none of them has been able to write like Wilde. Wherein lay the secret of this wit that seems so easy and which nobody can achieve? In Wilde's discovery of the supreme unimportance of being earnest.

July 30, 1944

A Poetical Macbeth

MACBETH. By William Shakespeare
Lyric, Hammersmith

Macbeth is the nearest to the sheer unactable of all Shakespeare's tragedies; I will even go so far as to say that in comparison *King Lear* is child's play. (All the actor has to do with that old man is to make him look like something by Blake and talk like somebody out of the Book of Isaiah, if not the prophet himself, and the tragedian who cannot do both of these is, God bless us, a thing of naught.) But *Macbeth* is a soldier and a poet—it is a modern fashion which turns generals into poets: history shows us no poet turned general—and to make discrepancy's cup even fuller he is a villain with the nicest possible sense of his villainy. Malcolm calls *Macbeth* a butcher; but then Malcolm is prejudiced, and with sufficient reason. Now the Thane of Cawdor is not a killer for the fun of it, like Richard the Third, nor does he, as the second Richard would have done, commit murder in order to see what it feels like to be a murderer. Nor is there about him any of that modern hanky-panky which pretends that every murderer holds himself to be different from other murderers. *Macbeth* knows exactly what he is doing, has no taste for it—he feels compunction, “Get thee back: my soul is too much charged With blood of thine already”—and realizes that he must go on doing it. “I am in blood Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er.” Nobody in Scotland despises *Macbeth* more than *Macbeth* despises himself. He knows that his besetting sin is ambition, working in the soil of his own weak nature. “Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going” has reference to more than daggers. In his heart of hearts *Macbeth* knows that ambition would have made him a murderer sans Witches and sans Spouse.

Now how shall an actor play this monster? With a swashing and martial outside, and a hint of that valour and uprightness which have won him “golden opinions”? But Nature has denied Mr

Milton physical magnificence as forthrightly as she denied the late William Terriss—the sculptor's *beau idéal* of a general, and one who could have bestridden a horse in any *Siegesallee* in any of the world's capitals—the wit to string three words of Shakespeare together and know what they meant. It is obvious from the start that Mr Milton, realizing the corporal inadequacy, decided to throw away the soldier and concentrate on the poet and philosopher, but chiefly the poet. Bearing in mind all the Macbeths that I have seen, I say that I have never known the verse to be spoken so beautifully, not in this passage or that, but everywhere. Here at last was that tapestry, at once splendid and sombre, which Shakespeare hung on the walls of Glamis! Much of the rendering was onomatopoeic, and it is not possible that

The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums
has ever been better said.

Mr Milton has obviously been at immense pains with his voice; that note of wailing and moaning which has been the envy of sirens was entirely absent. There was a great display of noise at the end, and if some of it was hysterical, one had just to reflect that no actor can have everything. Irving was vocally inadequate in this last act, but then, as Ellen Terry writes, he made up for it by looking like “a great famished wolf.” Mr Milton's physical means do not permit the full hurly-burly demanded here, and it is here that I expect to see, or rather to hear, Mr Wolfit, who can never be a gaunt and famished Wolfit, make stupendous amends. What I shall remember about Mr Milton is his playing of the banquet scene, his touches of Irvingesque humour—“Had I three ears, I'd hear thee” and “Thou comest to use thy tongue; thy story quickly”—and the hushed, almost hypnotic delivery of the “Tarquin's ravishing stride” speech.

“La Somnambula” will never be one of Miss Vivienne Bennett's best rôles. It is the old business of the *optique du théâtre* all over again. I just do not believe in tip-toeing little ladies demanding to be filled from crown to toe top-full of direst cruelty. Lady Macbeth must be harder than nails, and Miss Bennett is about as hard as clinging ivy. “Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't,” commanded Lady M. Whereat I half expected her lord

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to reply, "Mignonne, allons voir si la rose . . ."! However, on the understanding that I am not intended to believe a single word this Lady Macbeth says, I regard Miss Bennett's performance as a brilliant piece of work. Had not the sleep-walking scene pathos, do you ask? Yes and no. Yes, because this actress's Sonia (in *Uncle Vanya*) had pathos. No, because the thought of murder, let alone of actual complicity in an actual crime, had never entered that pretty, waking head. This scene, played authentically, is much too grand for the tears which Miss Bennett easily evoked the other evening. It is a matter not of inches but of inner force. Dimpling Windermere can never gloom like Wastwater, awesome even in sunlight. To Miss Bennett, however, let this credit be given that she keeps her performance in one key and nowhere forces the note beyond her physical correspondency. The rest of the company wobbled between the goodish and the baddish, with the exception of the three wholly admirable Witches, a pasty-faced First Murderer with a fine contempt for his employer, a most pathetic Ghost of Banquo, and a brilliant little performance by a boy who is going to be an actor some day.

The production was unnoticeable and therefore in every way first-class. Not once did Mr Stephen Thomas obtrude himself between us and the play, and I congratulate him on having the wit to give the stage plenty of light and leave it to his actors to suggest this play's darkness.

August 6, 1944

A Nod to the Blind

KEEP GOING. A Revue by Betty Astell
Palace

CRITICISM should be constructive? I agree. But suppose nobody pays any attention? In Ibsen's *A Doll's House* Dr Rank, going out to die, asks Helmer for a cigar.

NORA [*striking a wax match*]. Let me give you a light.

RANK. A thousand thanks.

[*She holds match. He lights his cigar at it.*]

RANK. And now, good-bye!

HELMER. Good-bye, good-bye, my dear fellow.

NORA. Sleep well, Dr Rank.

RANK. Thanks for the wish.

NORA. Wish me the same.

RANK. You? Very well, since you ask me—Sleep well; and thanks for the light.

In my notice of a production of this play some little time ago I asked what the producer meant by allowing *Helmer* to light the Doctor's cigar? I pointed out that the whole cigar incident was introduced to enable Rank to say good-bye to Nora in four glowing words. A week or two later I saw the play again. *Helmer was still lighting Rank's cigar, and Rank was still thanking Helmer.* The truth, of course, is that the critic can construct until he is blue in the face and nobody will take the slightest notice. The theatre, whatever it may say, doesn't want constructive criticism. Does any producer, being told that his stage is too dark, ever turn on more light? No. Does any actor, on being told that he is inaudible, ever turn on more voice? No. Is there any point in continuing to be constructive? No. Why, then, do I continue? Because I am a fool.

I have been looking at the list of plays presented at the Arts Theatre during the last twelve months, and I find two Restoration

comedies, two Old English comedies, a Victorian farce, an Edwardian comedy, two early Shaw plays, one translation and one adaptation from the Norwegian, one French play, one Spanish play, and Drinkwater's unique attempt at being funny. Does it not begin to look as though the Arts Theatre was interested in all centuries but this and every country but its own? The management may very well reply that there are no worth-while present-day plays, and plead its recent competition as justification. Now it so happens that I have been luckier. I have discovered an admirable play. It is about shirkers in war-time. It has a cast of ten people. It has one set. It is a little miracle of craftsmanship. It is extremely witty. And it is based on the theme of Mr Churchill's "Come, then; let us to the task, to the battle, to the toil—each to our part, each to our station." Where, then, is the snag? In this; the play is by Mr H. F. Maltby.

Twenty-one years ago Mr Maltby wrote a farcical comedy called *Three Birds*. This exhibited three gold-digging little harpies, not in glorious Technicolor but in all the drab horror of their common little minds. So in *The Compleat Wangler* Mr Maltby deals with the people who leave the task, the toil and the battle to others, and get themselves into safe, fussy, home-keeping jobs. The centre of this wangers' web is the family grandmother, a terrifying old hag who is cajoled and bullied according to the wangers' needs. But Grandma knows how many beans make five, and before the end of the play counts them out in full view of her disconcerted family. An admirable corrective to sentimentalities of the *Mrs Miniver* order, in which dragonsome old ladies turn out to have hearts of gold. Mr Maltby's Grandma is an old witch at the beginning and remains an old witch to the end; the point is that she is an old witch in the right. I am not going to pretend that this play will bring tears to the eyes of lovers holding hands; it is altogether too astringent. There is one decent boy who joined up on the fourth day of the war, saying, rather shamefacedly, that he "might as well be in it." "Oh," says Grandma, with a glare at the assembled shirkers, "and where do you work?" Now will the Arts Theatre kindly put on this play?

Keep Going, the new revue at the Palace Theatre, is bright,

quick-moving, reasonably entertaining, and competently and professionally acted. The programme tells us that it is devised, written, and composed by Miss Betty Astell. Does this suggest two Cowards in the field? No, but it points to a possible Coward and a quarter. While the lyrics are fair—perhaps “bored” is not the rhyme Tennyson would have chosen for “Maud”—the music is remarkably tuneful; the Tudor pastiche, accompanying words said to have been written by Anne Boleyn while awaiting execution, is extremely clever. My own view is that the stuff was probably composed by the bluff King himself! The sketches are not, I think, of Miss Astell’s devising, which permits me to say that “Radio Agincourt” and the one about sleeping in Tube shelters should come out. As against these, there is a delicious skit in which everything appertaining to opera is included except the music: thus proving, if proof were needed, that if it were not for the tunes, opera—and you can throw in music-drama as well—shows the human mind at the most lambent of its idiocy. The ballet always excepted. Corybantomanes will like to hear that there is plenty in this show to ravish them: comely young ladies tie themselves into exquisite knots, while young gentlemen in mustard-coloured suits whose sleeves come below their thumbs hurl themselves energetically about.

There is a charming, if unidentifiable, newcomer; I mean the young lady who, unable to decide whether to look like Ginger Rogers or Betty Grable, makes an attractive compromise. I understand Mr Cyril Fletcher’s admirers to hold that this clever comedian’s reach tallies with his grasp, and that the result is heaven. A blatant non-Browningsesque heaven, perhaps, but let that pass. Mr Billy Tasker is obviously pleased with himself. But since it is in the charming, naïve way of a little boy of four we are pleased too. Miss Astell, in addition to devising, writing and composing, does a little acting, singing and dancing. Miss Phyllis Monkman? This admirable trouser and first-class comédienne begins where the rest of the show leaves off. She is intensely amusing throughout, and her letter-writing scene achieves a pathos as genuine as it is restrained.

August 13, 1944

A Notable Week

PEER GYNT. By Henrik Ibsen. Translated by Norman Ginsbury
New

TO-MORROW THE WORLD. By James Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau
Aldwych

LAST week, in an unguarded moment, I let slip my private opinion that Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, like some other world-masterpieces, is "all very jolly and boring." I withdraw and apologize abjectly. I now declare that there is neither iota nor scintilla of jollity in this cavernous and gloomy masterpiece. Am I now allowed to say how odd I find it that in this matter of personal opinion B can proclaim and get away with something that A mustn't even whisper? Fire from Heaven did not descend upon Montague when he pronounced the sensuousness in Ibsen's plays to be a mist cold and clammy enough to freeze a faun. Flames will not, I think, consume that eminent colleague who, on Friday morning last, likened *Peer Gynt* to our *Doctor Faustus*—"One of those masterpieces in which two great peaks are joined by flat and somewhat tedious lowlands."

Talking of Mr Norman Ginsbury's new translation, my colleague held that "the absurdities that Norse fantasy seems to acquire in translation have never before been so unobtrusive." This marks the point at which one must be on one's guard. Because Norse fantasy may be absurd to the English mind and in translation does not mean that it is absurd absolutely and in the original. No German will ever 'get' the fun of slithy toves gyring and gimbling in the wabe. I remember a film in which a Nazi colonel repeated Lewis Carroll's line, saying, "Wabe"—he pronounced it in the German manner—"Was heisst Wabe?" And I once lent a copy of *Pickwick* to an elderly Frenchman, who returned it saying that anybody who attached so much importance to tittlebats was too great a fool to be the hero of a novel. Let it be confessed that I have no feeling for Norse trolls and gnomes. Perhaps that is because I find the Norse tongue *ustygkelig stygt*, to use Peer's phrase for the

unspeakably grim. I have listened loyally to the "News in Norwegian" every night for three years, and am still, alas! unable to tell which of the sounds means "the." I am prepared to weep buckets on behalf of "Madam Butterfly," but could not shed a tear for "Fru Butterflog."

Now let me quit fooling. My principal objection to this admitted masterpiece is that throughout it Ibsen seems to have been in three minds. He begins with a young egoist ruthlessly purposed to realize himself through the satisfaction of his own will. After which he lets him degenerate into a lying, loafing, weak-kneed little charlatan. (Does Ibsen mean that all monsters are mouthing whippersnappers? That wouldn't account for Napoleon or Hitler.) In the end Peer is an empty bladder. He likens life to an onion—"Nothing but swathings, each smaller and smaller with nothing inside it." For his epitaph he wants "Here No One lies buried." Our Mr Shaw pats Ibsen on the back for this, whereas when Macbeth says exactly the same things in better language, Mr Shaw rounds on Shakespeare and says that it is "to turn from life, strength, resolution, morning air, and eternal youth, to the terrors of a drunken nightmare." What is sauce for the gander should be sauce for the gosling. Why are the terrors of Macbeth a drunken nightmare and those of Peer Gynt the last word in sanity? No, I think Ibsen got himself into a muddle. He created a monster, then turned the monster into pygmy, and finished by turning pygmy into Everyman. The tidying-up at the end? But Ibsen was the last person to believe in that twaddle about the redemption of A by Miss B. (Did Goethe invent this? Marlowe had no truck with it.) An irreclaimable egoist remains irreclaimable though all the Solveigs in the world sing themselves blue in the face.

The play is, of course, a producer's paradise, and Mr Guthrie has obviously enjoyed himself enormously. And, in my poor view, is entirely justified. What pipes and timbrels! What wild ecstasy! What bogys and brownies! What wild button-moulding! In plain English, I thought that the production was superb, that Mr Ralph Richardson was excellent in all three characters, and that everybody else died or got married or went mad more than competently. But it was one man's evening, as in the case of this play it always must

be. Here is the actor's dream fulfilled; to be always on the stage and never to stop talking. But great occasions require heroic response; certainly on Thursday the response was forthcoming. I left the theatre saying to myself

When Richardsons begin to Peer,
With heigh! the doxy over the dale . . .

Messrs James Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau, the authors of *To-morrow the World*, have the sense to perceive that Germany's twelve-year-old Nazis are in every way as much entitled to our respect as Casabianca. That these children live and fight and are prepared to die for an ideal. Logic being the last thing ever taught in our schools, it must now be patiently explained that the fact that to non-German minds the ideal inspiring these children is horrible, loathsome, and altogether monstrous doesn't mean that this ideal is not being carried out by its victims with courage, persistence, and elimination of self. The complete and utter poignancy of this play lies in the tumult caused in a small soul when it perceives that the only world it knows is crumbling. Let me make the point with some fervour that a twelve-year-old cannot grasp the obligation to think for himself, and that blameworthiness in the young German begins with the rejection of that obligation. To think of this play's central figure in terms of "stinking Nazi brat" is to do oneself and a tragic theme less than justice.

The piece stops at exactly the right point. No hint is given whether, in the opinion of the authors, the child's re-education will be permanent. A favourite misquotation is

A man convinced against his will
Will hold the same opinion still.

For the authors' purposes the misquotation is better than Butler's original. How long before a young Nazi, left to himself and back in his own country, will shake off his new-found convictions and return to the old ones?

Master David O'Brien is a child-actor of genius. Whether that genius will grow up nobody can tell. All that can be said for certain is that the surest way to destroy child-genius is to over-exploit it.

A NOTABLE WEEK

If I had my way Master O'Brien would for the next four years be made to play a great deal of cricket and football. The alternative, of course, is to pack him off to Hollywood prepared to welcome him back at the age of eighteen possessed of a million dollars and no talent.

September 3, 1944

Right Music, Wrong Words

THE BANBURY NOSE. By Peter Ustinov
Wyndham's

WAITING for my bus the other evening I heard a conversation between two women who had just come away from *Così fan tutte*. "My dear," said one, "I adored it. The costumes were heaven. But couldn't they have found some *other* music for it?" Mr Ustinov has written an extremely witty, always interesting, and sometimes moving play. But couldn't he have found some other idea to hang it on?

Some of us Britishers think that on the whole the British haven't made a bad job of things. In other words, we are proud of the Empire. We have moments of Kiplingesque fervour. "They thought, not a few of them, of an old sword in a passage, or above a breakfast-room table, seen and fingered by stealth since they could walk." Some of us have been known to read our *Stalky* without openly jeering. Few of us are inclined to dismiss Marlborough as a dunderhead or Wellington as a dodderer. "It all depends on that article." Some of us have thought that "that article"—need I say that the Duke was referring to the British private soldier?—has served his country tolerably well. I have been in the company of people who have talked of "Bobs" with affection. I have heard people speak well of Kitchener and Haig. To-day quite a lot of people think quite a lot of "Monty." Perhaps we are wrong. That is the message of this play, which tells us incessantly and reiterantly that the British soldier is an ass.

It may be true, as Sir Osbert Sitwell says, that "Shakespeare outdistances Waterloo as an English triumph." It may be that all our colonizings and commonwealthings have been a vast mistake, and that our explorers and adventurers and those who have been so foolish as to carry the British flag to places where it wasn't wanted would have done better if they had stayed at home in the taverns of Fleet Street or the attics of Bloomsbury scribbling dirty

little poems on dirty little pieces of paper. Mr Ustinov may well have been sent by Providence to correct our folly and our patriotic excesses. I left the theatre murmuring, "Mr Dick sets us all right. Janet, heat the bath."

One thing leads to another even in literary allusion. On the way home I bethought me of a passage in *King Solomon's Mines*. Good, I think it is, addresses the natives in their own tongue, explaining that he has specially learnt it before condescending to visit them. "Only, my lord," says the chief native, "thou hast learnt it very badly." (I have not seen the book for forty years.) Mr Ustinov has obviously a message to deliver. Unfortunately his message is broken-backed. His play shows us four generations in a line of soldiers who have been painted by Alma-Tadema, Lawrence, Gainsborough, and the painters who were before Gainsborough. First, in that section of the line exposed to our view, is Colonel Algernon Hume-Banbury (Mr Eric Maturin), about whom, it seems, there was never anything to be done. Second, Lieutenant-General Reginald Hume-Banbury (Mr Roger Livesey), an old swine who regards chasing the Indian native as a form of pig-sticking. It seems that he was the first Hume-Banbury to endeavour to break away from military tradition, that he failed, and that he has received as the reward of failure an old age of fretfulness amounting to paranoic distemper. Third in the line is Major-General Algernon Hume-Banbury (Mr Alan Trotter), who also wanted to break away and also failed. His reward is a state of nincompoopery and numskullery unseen on the stage since the lack-wits of Shakespeare. He is as potent a piece of imbecility as Shallow's cousin Slender. The fourth in the line is Reginald Hume-Banbury (Mr Richard Wordsworth), who has made good his escape. And what is this intellectual going to do with his freedom? Nothing, so far as I can see, except walk about in corduroy trousers and contribute verse to highbrow magazines. Since the whole of Mr Ustinov's point is that age, with all its achievements, traditions and experience, should now pack up and hand over to youth, surely the representatives of youth should be shown as something more than the essence and epitome of nothing? Personally I would sooner hand over the British Empire to the stupidest, crassest

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sergeant-major than to Mr Ustinov's twittering Bloomsbury sparrow. But then I may be wrong. It may be that somebody ought to heat the bath for me!

One word more. This play may be full of sedition, false doctrine, heresy, and schism. That doesn't matter. I find it entrancing to listen to for the reason that Mr Ustinov is probably the greatest master of stage-craft now writing in this country. He has as much wit as Mr Coward. He has a far greater sense of the theatre than Mr Priestley deigns to have nowadays. His stream of mind is perpetual, and I am not worried that the stream is running the wrong way. He writes magnificent parts for actors, and if I had the space I could write a whole column about the performances of the players already mentioned and also about those of Messrs Michael Shepley, Lyn Evans, Hugh Burden, and Eric Messiter, and Miss Ursula Jeans.

September 10, 1944

Mr Olivier's Richard

RICHARD III. By William Shakespeare
New

ANY critic sitting at Shakespeare's most rampageous melodrama must realize that he has three Richards to contend with. The first is the 'actual' Richard, and perhaps he need not bother very much about this largely conjectural figure. The second is the much more 'real' figure created by Shakespeare. The third is the Richard put forward by the actor. An eminent colleague has written of Mr Olivier in this rôle that he is "wisely careful not to play it in the old way." But is he sure that Mr Olivier possesses the physical means to play it in the old way? My colleague goes on, "It is no part of his plan to return to full-blooded stage tradition and to carry conviction by storm." But I submit that Mr Olivier carries almost complete conviction by a great deal of storm. It is the quality of the storm that has changed—the difference between the tropic cyclone and the polar blast. All stage storms must be vocal, and Mr Olivier cannot thunder. His high, shimmering tenor has not the oak-cleaving quality; it is a wind which gets between your ribs.

Let us look at what the other characters say of Richard. Seven times in this play he is alluded to as a "boar." Now Shakespeare was not in the habit of using words loosely; when he said "boar" he meant "boar." "The chafed boar, the mountain lioness, The ocean swells not so"; "Who, like a boar too savage, doth root up His country's peace." "Have I not in my time heard lions roar? Have I not heard the sea puff'd up with winds Rage like an angry boar chafed with sweat?" Even more clinchingly, take Prince Hal's "Where sups he? doth the old boar feed in the old frank?" Always in Shakespeare "boar" stands for something powerful, massive, and even clumsy. (Oberon couples boar and bear.) Now let it be said that there is nothing of the boar about Mr Olivier's Richard; this actor has neither the voice nor the shoulders. But let me, like my discerning colleague, congratulate him on being "as

graceful as he is witty and accomplished." Mr Olivier has had the first-rate notion of making first-rate virtue out of flat necessity. And he has this come-back to any criticism on this point—that Shakespeare has provided excuses for him all over the place. Just as the First Murderer in *Macbeth* talks poetry because Shakespeare was a poet, so this boar has witty bristles because Shakespeare's mind bristled with wit. An ideal Richard will not let you forget the boar; Mr Olivier never suggests him. Serpent, rather. Something spiritually evil, and fascinated by the power to work evil.

As I sat attentive at this admirable performance I seemed to see an extraordinary succession of images—Charles II plotting mischief, any old actor's Robert Macaire and Alfred Jingle, any good actor's Iago and even Iachimo, and, above all, a great deal of Irving's Mephistopheles. People still talk of the way in which the Old Man would say about Martha, "I don't know what's to become of her—I won't have her!" Yes, there was a great deal of Irving in Wednesday's performance, in the bite and devilry of it, the sardonic impudence, the superb emphases, the sheer malignity and horror of it. If I have a criticism it is that Mr Olivier takes the audience a little too much into his confidence. Richard is immensely tickled at the virtuosity with which he proposes to take the world-stage. And, in his hero's opening soliloquy, Shakespeare is at great pains to convey this relish. But Mr Olivier makes that speech rather more than something overheard. This Richard means us to overhear; we are positively tipped the wink.

Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
 Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
 Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
 Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
 Grim-visaged war hath smooth'd his wrinkled front, I don't think;

Mr Olivier may not say those last three words; his eyebrows certainly signal them.

This Richard coheres from start to finish, and is a complete presentation of the character as the actor sees it and his physical means permit. Yet one has to close one's ears to certain disadvantages. Take that moment when Stanley says "Richmond is on the

seas," and Richard has his tremendous "There let him sink, and be the seas on him!" This, surely, must be an occasion for Voice. It was here on Wednesday that old Martha came to mind; that I seemed to hear Irving chuckle, "There let her sink, and be the seas on her!" It is a moot point whether Richard's "There is no creature loves me" should or should not crook a finger at pathos. Mr Olivier says "No" firmly. This Richard is bent on carrying the joke through. And on the note of

March on, join bravely, let us to't pell-mell;
If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell,

he brings the drama to a jaunty, jingle-esque conclusion. To sum up, I do not think that this is Shakespeare's Richard. It could not be said of this Renaissance villain at the end that "The bloody dog is dead." "Dog" is wrong. What Richmond would say over Mr Olivier's corse is: "We have scotch'd the snake *and* kill'd it!" But even if this Richard is not Shakespeare's it is very definitely Mr Olivier's, and I do not propose to forget its mounting verve and sustained excitement.

The production is fair. Mr Burrell, having realized that the Middle Ages were not the Dark Ages, gives us plenty of illumination to see his actors by, though I still can't quite understand why Richard should be crowned in the middle of the night! In one respect only do I fault the production; this is that it is too glittering and too band-boxy. Everybody, like Pinero's French governess, is over-gowned and over-hatted. Indeed, one feels that the whole thing could be turned into ballet at a minute's notice, and I have no doubt that Mr Helpmann would dance Richard to perfection. There is, however, no mistake about Mr Herbert Menges's music, which, without being obtrusively archaic or disgustingly atonal, suggests the fifteenth century.

September 17, 1944

Postscript to Richard

FELICITY JASMINE. By Gordon Sherry
St James's

THREE'S A FAMILY. By Phoebe and Henry Ephron
Saville

SEVERAL people have written to remind me that the boar was Gloucester's device, if that's the proper heraldic term, and that this accounts for the constant references to him as "the boar." I agree in part. Hastings, who thinks that he is Gloucester's friend, may well speak in this sense when he says, "To fly the boar before the boar pursues, Were to incense the boar to follow us." I feel that Stanley is talking to more vicious purpose when he says, "Sir Christopher, tell Richmond this from me: That in the sty of this most bloody boar My son George Stanley is frank'd up in hold." For me that dashing old lady, Queen Margaret, clinches the matter when she calls Gloucester "Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog!"

Other actors besides Mr Olivier have chosen not to stress this aspect of Richard. That great player Richard Mansfield, who made his first appearance in the play at the Globe Theatre, London, on an evening in March 1889, would have had the audience believe that Richard's deformity was trifling. In the preface to his version of the play Mansfield wrote:

We have many pictures, notably the one at Windsor Castle, that in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries, the painting at Eton, and the portrait in the Bethnal Green Museum. In all of these the general characteristics are the same—the face mournful, almost to pathos, suggestive of wonderful facility of expression and firmness. We also have John Stow's authority that Richard "was of bodily shape comely enough," and the word of the Countess of Desmond who danced with him at King Edward's Court and declared him "the handsomest man in the room, his brother, the King, excepted."

As against this here is a passage from *A Catalogue and Succession of the Kings, Princes, Dukes, etc., since the Norman Conquest to this Present Yeare 1619; collected by Raphe Brooke Esquire, Yorke Heraude:*

By common report a monster in nature; for hee had many teeth when he was borne. He was very much deformed of his body; of stature he was but low, crooke-backed, his left shoulder much higher than the right, his visage vncomely, his complexion swart, his left arme withered almost to the bone. . . .

And here is a description of Richard after his death:

. . . the slain body, all ragged and torne, naked and not so much as a clout left to couer his shame, was trussed behind Blanch Sengler, his Pursuiant of Arms, like a Hog or Calfe, his head and armes hanging on the one side of the horse and his legs on the other side, all besprinkled with mire and blood, & was so brought to Leicester, & there for a miserable spectacle, the space of 2 daies lay naked and vnburied; his remembrance being as odious to all, as his person deformed & loathsome to be looked upon.

But Mansfield went further than the denial of physical deformity:

The deformity of his *mind*, as drawn by Shakespeare, has to be adhered to, although history fails to corroborate it. Richard did not slay Edward, the son of Henry VI, he did not kill King Henry, he did not murder his Queen, the Lady Anne, and there are grave doubts as to his having been implicated in the deaths of Edward V and his brother, absolutely no evidence existing that Henry VII did not find both Princes alive upon his accession.

All of which seems to me to give whoever plays Richard considerable latitude. And there, for the moment, I must leave what is very nearly my favourite play.

I would rather the Queen's Hall remained in ruins than that it should re-open with a performance of the "Mairzy Doats" Overture, followed by a Serenade for Strings "When Your Heart Goes

Bumpety-Bump, It's Love, Love, Love," to be again followed by Somebody's Swing Symphony. I would rather the St James's Theatre, which ranks with the Haymarket as a repository of all that is gracious and elegant in British playgoing, had remained closed than that it should re-open with such a piece as *Felicity Jasmine*. *Felicity Jasmine* is a perfume which, rubbed by English minxes behind the ears of American soldiers, increases the minxes' power of attraction, while reinforcing the American soldiers' power of resistance. There is a kind of sniggering, half-hearted, would-be eroticism about this play which, alternating with sentimental inanity, so revolted me that I left the theatre at half-time. If the piece had any hint of Rabelaisian humour or good, salty wit, I should rejoice. But it hasn't. It is a play for Peeping Toms. The acting couldn't save it, and didn't. It should not, in my opinion, have been produced.

"The badinage," said Montague of some pseudo-historical romance, "ranges among such lawful topics as the corpulence of one's father's guests." It might be thought that expectant motherhood is not a lawful subject for farce. But *Three's a Family* brings up what must surely be the first law of aesthetics: It All Depends. Everything depends not so much on what is doing in a theatre as who is doing it and how. In this play by Phoebe and Henry Ephron there is no pretence that pregnancy—for that is what this play is about—is a matter for furtive joking. The authors present an American family confronted with a variety of emotions and predicaments ranging from the tremors of expectant fatherhood to the exigencies of a too-small apartment, coal-black mammies who kidnap infants between hiccups, helpless mothers-to-be, and husbands who rush off to the war for the sake of peace and quiet. In my view the piece is irresistibly funny and the wit is such that we sit for three hours gazing at a world from which, by some enchantment, vulgarity is absent. The American version may be faster and fierouser, but that is their affair. The presentation at the Saville does very nicely for slower-going English folk. There is the neatest possible acting by Mr Morland Graham and Miss Netta Westcott, glorious nonsense by Messrs Aubrey Mallalieu, Jonathan Field, Harry Geldard, and George Cross, with entirely successful

POSTSCRIPT TO RICHARD

co-operation by Mesdames Joy Shelton, Eileen Dale and Anne Allan. And in the centre of it all Miss Vera Pearce, inviolate as the Statue of Liberty, heroically resists the encroachments of motherhood upon her personal liberty. Nature defeats her in the end, as the Atlantic Ocean defeated Mrs Partington.

September 24, 1944

A Very Mixed Bag

JENNY JONES. A Musical Play with words by Ronald Gow.

Lyrics by Harold Purcell. Music by Harry Parr Davies

Hippodrome

HAPPY AND GLORIOUS. A Revue

Palladium

NO MEDALS. By Esther McCracken

Vaudeville

SCANDAL AT BARCHESTER. Adapted from a novel of Trollope

by Vera Wheatley

Lyric

LET us once more clear our minds of cant. What is expected of me when I am invited to criticize a musical play? Am I expected to say whether the play will run? In that case my answer must be that I am not a prophet. But that on occasion I can make a shrewd guess. My guess is that *Jenny Jones* will run for a long time. It is poor enough, being richly endowed with the kind of thing the musical-comedy public likes best—complete vacuity of thought combined with lavish dispensation of everything else. Or am I supposed to be constructive? Very well, then, let me be constructive. But first let it be realized that no critic can be constructive about a canvas that is painted, a symphony that is performed, a book that is written, or a play that is produced. He can only help the author of these things to do better next time. The programme tells me that Mr Black has a musical adviser. I suggest that he should engage a dramatic adviser who will tell him when a play won't do and why. An adviser of this sort would have told Mr Black that the plot of *Jenny Jones* is a jumble of insensate, staggering imbecility. That anybody with any sense of the theatre would have cut nine-tenths of the play and entertained grave doubts about retaining the remaining tenth.

Mr Black has a band and a chorus and some people who can sing.

If, then, he must introduce into a Welsh mining-village the famous incident of the Juggler of Notre-Dame, why not reproduce a scene out of Massenet's opera? The piece ends with an extract from a supposed musical play, entitled *An Episode in Havannah*, which is the last word in the trite and commonplace. The programme makes mention of some one called the Chief of Production Department. I fancy that very little research would have been necessary to discover that Nelson was not broad-shouldered, fat and florid like Squire Western. I think too that Nelson never made a public appearance without his decorations, and I understand that the midshipman of the period did not wear epaulettes or a sword. These be trifles. But in a trivial entertainment it is the trifles that matter. I felt extraordinarily sorry for Mr Baliol Holloway, who wandered through the piece as though he were a phantom out of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Sorry, too, for Mr Jimmy James and Mr Deering Wells, who ambled about like the broker's men in an under-rehearsed pantomime looking for something funny to say and do. Some compensation was afforded by Miss Carole Lynn, whose singing, however, appeared to know nothing between an ultimate pianissimo and a piercing shriek of which Euston had been jealous. Mr Tommy Linden managed to be effective in the muddle of unrelated welter. Or do I mean the welter of unrelated muddle? And there was a nice little boy called Malcolm Thomas, who was allowed to talk too much and permitted to sing too little. His is the pure treble of the choir boy. Constructive as ever, I suggest that Mr Black should sacrifice several chunks of the plot, let down a velvet curtain, and send on Master Thomas to discourse of Angels Ever Bright and Fair and other cherubim and seraphim.

Mr Tommy Trinder is not, I venture to think, skilful at differentiating between Walkley's pronouncement that an actor should abound in his own qualities, and a state of being too full of himself. Several times in the Palladium production Mr Trinder makes pointed personal reference to a rival comedian in what Mr Sean O'Casey's Fluther Good would call a derogatory sense. This is extremely embarrassing, and I make the constructive suggestion to Mr Black that he should put a stop to it. When this good comedian

is not misled by his material he is very good indeed. Mr Debroy Somers and his orchestra are responsible for a medley which begins with Weber and proceeds with some lack of chronology via Tschai-kowsky to Wagner, with Ponchielli and the lesser masters thrown in. This roused the audience to frenzy, and above the din I heard one man shout to his neighbour, "Some composer! If only the classics sounded like that!"

No Medals is a tame little play about the war-time difficulties of the good housekeeper. People wander in and out, being vaguely sons and daughters and sons-in-law and daughters-in-law of the much-harassed lady of the house. I never quite made out whether the young woman with fair hair who played the Wren in the first act was the young lady in the dressing-gown of the second and third acts. That the run of the piece did not terminate before the curtain descended was entirely due to Miss Fay Compton, who perfectly realized that there is a point at which exasperation attains to the ecstasy of the saints. For three hours she put up a battle the like of which I have not seen since Richardson's great bowling feat against the Australians in the Manchester Test match of 1896. Of this Mr Neville Cardus has written, "Could it be that the gods had looked on and permitted so much striving to go unrewarded?" The Vaudeville gods were better mannered.

Scandal at Barchester is a delightful period piece. It tells how a bemused clergyman, passing poor on forty pounds a year, is accused of having misappropriated a cheque for twenty pounds. How his daughter decides that she cannot marry the archdeacon's son until her father's name is cleared. Doesn't the silly girl realize that she is not attainted even if her father has run off with the font? No, because these are the 'sixties, and the original author of the story is Anthony Trollope. The play is beautifully acted by Mr Felix Aylmer as the half-witted parson, except that he looks and behaves like Paganini, Mr Milton Rosmer as the unctuous archdeacon, and Mr Walter Piers as the henpecked bishop. That the young people are the usual nuisance is a fact which Mr Dennis Price and Miss Dorothy Hyson go a long way towards concealing, and Mr Stanley Lathbury vies with Miss Olga Lindo as to which shall be the more perfect. Mr Antony Holles is great

A VERY MIXED BAG

fun. Perhaps the best thing in the evening is Miss Winifred Oughton's Mrs Proudie taking the scene like a frigate in full sail with all top-gallants set. In overtaking her Death may not, as some modern poet said, "have committed rape." It was certainly an impertinence.

October 8, 1944

A Word to Mr Gielgud

THE CIRCLE. (Revival.) By Somerset Maugham
Haymarket

WEDNESDAY night ushered in with éclat Mr Gielgud's unadventurous programme of revivals. *The Circle* was a sure thing. It is one of Mr Maugham's best plays when it is logically interpreted, as I shall presently show that in this production it is not! Thursday saw a reprise of *Love for Love*, which has only recently finished a year's run in the West End. On Friday we had Mr Gielgud's fourth *Hamlet*, about which I hope to write later on. I understand that it is intended to revive the *Dream*, where there is nothing for Mr Gielgud to do except Oberonize in Valentine's dressing-gown. After that follows—believe it or not—*The Importance!* And then, I suppose, the whole non-magnoperative (except for *Hamlet*) cycle will begin again, what time Mr Wolfit, under the lee of Mendips and up to his neck in the Wash, is struggling heroically with a round of parts which includes Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, Lear, Richard III, Shylock, Jaques, Volpone, and, if I am not mistaken, Halvard Solness as make-weight. Since the war I have seen this mettlesome actor give three other magnificent performances—Ford's Giovanni and Shakespeare's Falstaff and Bottom. Whether C.E.M.A. bestows its blessing on that gay and gallant, if buffeted and beharassed, enterprise I do not know. C.E.M.A. is an august institution like my Lord Chesterfield, and may hold that a theatrical patron, like the other kind, is "one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help." C.E.M.A. might peruse the whole letter with profit. Like Johnson, Mr Gielgud is known and does not want notice. Well may he too hold himself "unwilling that the Publick should consider me as owing that to a Patron which Providence has enabled me to do for myself." Mr Gielgud has every physical grace an actor can desire, the genius of a Terry, and, *en somme*, owes his success wholly to himself. I challenge our leading actor

to appear in a part in which he will not be acclaimed. With this power to draw the entranced herd, what could such a leader not do? There is talk of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Pending that masterpiece, I call upon Mr Gielgud as the head of the English stage to bend up every corporal and intellectual agent to the feats of leadership expected of him.

Mr Gielgud is not by nature a comedian. Whenever I see him in a comic part I bethink me of John Philip Kemble and Hazlitt's tale of his "unaccountable abstracted air, the contracted eyebrows, and suspended chin of a man about to sneeze." No, despite the Congreavian antics, I cannot see or hear the comedian in Mr Gielgud, who for comedy substitutes a wonderful line of something which is half superciliousness and half moral priggishness. He would be admirable as Sir Willoughby Patterne or Aubrey Tanqueray. If Dickens had cast his novels in the form of plays he would have made a wonderful Dombey and a remarkable Pecksniff, a superb Mr Littimer (always supposing he was not cast for Steerforth), and a devastatingly subtle Mr Mould. "How much consolation," cried Mr Mould, "may I have diffused among my fellow-creatures by means of my four long-tailed prancers, never harnessed under ten pund ten!" Mr Gielgud plays the absurd husband in the manner of John Worthing's be-crêpe'd and famous entry.

Obviously this is as much the right way to play the part as Miss Arnaud's way with Lady Catherine is the wrong. The moral of this play is that if you steal from a friend a wife who is an empty-headed, commonplace, vain, chattersome minx you will find yourself later on in life tied to a mindless, over-dressed harridan who talks like Flora Finch and looks like Mrs Skewton. Does the reader remember Paula Tanqueray and her "I hate paints and dyes and messes"? Paula doesn't; she hates them only when they cease to be effective. This is an old story which our Lottie Venne told so pathetically and our beloved Yvonne refuses to tell at all. Her Lady Catherine at sixty has ten times the charm and fascination she can have had at twenty. Let all that vivacity, nonsensicality, and blazing fun loose in any drawing-room, and every little whey-faced ninny present must wilt still further at the thought that *that* is something to which she can never attain. Mr Maugham says to his

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young man: Don't run away with this chit, unless you are prepared to end up with an old fright like Lady Catherine. What the present production makes the lover say to the young wife is: Unless you promise to grow into an adorable, witty, and delightful old thing like Lady C. I won't take you on. Beautiful acting by Messrs Cecil Trouncer and Leslie Banks rounds off an evening which is as exciting as it is misdirected.

October 15, 1944

A Great Hamlet

HAMLET. By William Shakespeare
Haymarket

DAUGHTER JANIE. By Josephine Bentham and Hershel Williams
Apollo

HAMLET is not a young man's part. Consider how ill it becomes a stripling to hold forth on the life after death, the propriety of suicide, the nature of man, the exuberance or restraint of matrons, the actor's art, the Creator's "large discourse." But Mr Gielgud could not be of a better age; he is at the height of his powers; the conjunction is marvellously happy. When, fourteen years ago at the Old Vic, the curtain went up on the new Hamlet there was perhaps not very much there except infinite grace. Four years later, after the production at the New Theatre, I find that I wrote, "The impression gathered is that of a Hamlet who can fly into the most shattering of pets." Five years later (Lyceum), "One's impression of this brilliant performance does not outlast the moment of its brilliance. It is cometary. That was Hamlet, that was! and the sky is empty again." It gives me the greatest pleasure to say that now at last Mr Gielgud has stopped all the gaps.

The too-young Hamlet takes one's thoughts off this play in the way the concert-hall's infant prodigy takes them off the music; one fritters away attention wondering how all those runs and trills have been managed. Mr Gielgud is now completely and authoritatively master of this tremendous part. He is, we feel, this generation's rightful tenant of this "monstrous Gothic castle of a poem." He has acquired an almost Irvingesque quality of pathos, and in the passages after the play scene an incisiveness, a raillery, a mordancy worthy of the Old Man. He imposes on us this play's questing feverishness. The middle act gives us ninety minutes of high excitement and assured virtuosity; Forbes-Robertson was not more bedazzling in the "O, what a rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy. In short, I hold that this is, and is likely to remain, the best Hamlet

of our time, and that is why I urge Mr Gielgud to stick to the mantle of tragedy and leave lesser garments to others. For this actor, like John Philip Kemble, is not really a comedian. John Philip had the notion that by taking thought an actor can qualify himself for the lighter as for the more serious side of his art. This is not so. All the trying in the world would not have turned, say, Matthew Arnold into a dinner-table wit. It is the same with acting. Again, in Mr Gielgud's case, the old couplet comes to mind:

Whene'er he tries the airy and the gay,
Judgment, not genius, marks the cold essay.

As a comedian our First Player has no warmth, whereas as a tragedian he is all fire. He lives up to G. H. Lewes's dictum: the greatest artist is he who is greatest in the highest reaches of his art. And that is why I conjure him to stick to those rôles which entitle his critics to stand up and say to all the world: This is a great actor.

Many things are admirable *in their way*. Such things, for example, as the musical strains which issue forth nightly between the hours of eleven and twelve from the melancholy little box at my elbow. Millions, I feel sure, are comforted when they hear some love-sick swain croon in a voice like a sea-lion chewing a golosh:

I couldn't sleep a wink last night,
Because we had that silly fight . . .
Yes, I had to call you up this morning
Because I couldn't sleep a wink last night.

But I do not think a musical critic would be expected to pronounce about this. Comic strips are excellent, but they are not the concern of art critics. Literary critics are not asked to discuss Virginia Creeper's mush or Rhoda Dendron's twaddle. Why, then, should dramatic critics be asked to pronounce upon the equivalent of these things merely because it takes place in a theatre? Imagine *Pride and Prejudice* shorn of Mr and Mrs Bennet, their daughter Elizabeth, Mr Collins and Lady Catherine. Imagine that the whole book had been devoted to Lydia and Kitty and how, in the absence of their parents, they invited the officers of the Meryton Militia to a party. Even so one must believe that Jane would have made something

of it, just as in *Mansfield Park* she made something of Sir Thomas Bertram's sudden return from Antigua to the untimely interruption of those private theatricals. Was not our own E. V. Lucas once heard to say that Sir Thomas's unexpected entry was the third greatest event in the history of the world? Alas, the authors of *Daughter Janie* have made nothing out of the party thrown by the dreadful little Colburn brats to the American soldiers. What in this play is not noise is racket; what is not racket is noise.

It so happens that I am a film addict, and have seen this story some ten or twelve times as the second feature in programmes in such localities as Paddington and Camden Town. Generally the plainest girl of the party turns out to be the possessor of a Voice. It is summer, the window is open, and a passer-by hears the Voice *swinging* Schubert's *Serenade*. And who is that passer-by? None other than the great singing-master Professor Pimpinelli. With the result that within three weeks the Voice has been re-educated and is performing *Tosca* or *Turandot* at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York. But *Daughter Janie* isn't as amusing as that. It is just nothing. The moral? That a spot of "booze" and "necking" will help the soldier boys in the dark days to come. I thought of

Et, ô ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole!

and wondered why the shrill cries of precocious bunny-huggers should be so much less enchanting. But perhaps I ought to recognize that Verlaine is out of fashion, and that the proper thing is to relate this play to Rainbow Corner and the author of

Is you is, or is you ain't, ma Baby?

After all, the aim of the theatre was and is, as an earlier dramatic critic remarked, to show the age and body of the time his form and pressure. It is arguable that *Daughter Janie* does this. Did I not in the bus the other evening hear one over-dressed little chit say to another, "Where was me and Ida last night? Out Yankin', of course."

October 22, 1944

Mr Blakelock Ruins a Play

THE BREADWINNER. (Revival.) By Somerset Maugham
Arts

IN my day children dined downstairs on Sundays only. There was generally a visitor or two, and we were not allowed to speak until dessert. Then a little bell was rung, my father and his guest lit their cigars, my mother and her friend put on a smiling aspect, and for half an hour the children would be allowed to make nuisances of themselves. Then there were other rules and observances. I cannot remember that any of us youngsters ever sat in my father's armchair, though we occasionally took liberties with my mother's. And I swear that the morning paper was untouched until my father had seen it. Time has changed all that for the worse. To-day the young people loll in the best chairs while parents sit wherever they can, or stand. The paper is torn to shreds, and adolescents keep up a perpetual din. I have no doubt that presently a bell will be struck permitting the elders to talk.

In the Preface to *Misalliance* Mr Shaw lays down very wisely the children's rights and duties. He begins with the right to live and goes on:

And this right to live includes, and in fact is, the right to be what the child likes and can, to do what it likes and can, to make what it likes and can, to think what it likes and can, to smash what it dislikes and can, and generally to behave in an altogether unaccountable manner within the limits imposed by the similar rights of its neighbours.

In the matter of society's rights over the child, Mr Shaw goes on to babble about knowing the rules of the road, the ability to read placards, compose telegrams and so on. I think I would simplify this. All I would ask of the child is that he should shut the door quietly and play the fool nowhere but in his own nursery. A twenty-year-old was lecturing me the other day on modern writing, which,

said he, "proceeds from a point of *internal spontaneity* rather than from the old-fashioned *objective sensitivity*." I said, "In that case, young gentleman, we writers may as well compose ourselves to this situation, for to this situation we must come, as Mrs Bardell said." "And who is Mrs Bardell?" asked the twenty-year-old. I spent the next half-hour explaining very patiently that there were poets before T. S. Eliot, novelists before Virginia Woolf, painters before Picasso, and composers before Béla Bartók. "Do they matter?" I replied, "No, my boy, I don't think they matter to you." And that, roughly, is what Mr Maugham's play is about.

The Breadwinner is as to two-thirds an admirable comedy. It fails in the third act because Mr Maugham forgot the Old-Style Northern Farmer's

I thowt a said whot a owt to 'a said an' I coom'd awaäy.

By the end of the second act Mr Maugham has squeezed every drop out of the theme and the sponge is dry. And then, having to fill it again, he fills it with the waters of farce instead of comedy. There is a long and preposterous scene in which the stockbroker is vamped by his wife's best friend. Is this sheer dissembling? And if so, with what purpose? Is it the belated discovery of a passion? After twenty years of next-door-neighbourhood? Nonsense. Is it half and half? We don't know. This is immediately followed by a scene in which the vamping process is repeated, this time by the vamp's daughter. Then again, Judy, the broker's daughter, having indulged in Act 2 in some quite incredible facetiousness anent the possibility of her father's suicide, now in Act 3 becomes a model of sensitiveness. The piece, in a word, has ceased to be consistent with itself.

I now desire to retract all I have said about the first two acts, which are completely vitiated for the following reason. Over and over again it is insisted that the stockbroker is a man without charm or vestige of a sense of humour, a man completely summed up in the word "stuffy." Then why not get a stuffy actor or even an actor who can simulate stuffiness? Because, as Mr Maugham well knew, no West End audience can be assembled for a play whose leading man has not oodles of charm and lashings of wit. I find that

when Mr Squire created the part I wrote, "There should have been some spark of malignancy, of deep-seated selfishness, of long-meditated revenge in this man supposed capable of playing Gauguin's trick, and the part demanded a wryer mouth and more sardonic wrinkles, deeper layers of unsuspected strength of character, greater momentum, with a touch of Mr McKinnel's ruthlessness." This applies with equal directness to Mr Denys Blakelock, an actor of more elegances of mind and manner than any six light comedians of the commercial stage permit themselves to-day. Why this actor is allowed to languish in highbrow holes and intellectual corners is one of the things that I have given up trying to understand. His performance the other evening could be described as a riot except that a better word would be ripple. Is it argued that this father's humour, wit, irony, and charm are so deeply submerged that his family can detect nothing of them? Rubbish! Mr Blakelock makes the evening and ruins it.

And now I am going to put forward an outrageous suggestion. This is that some commercial management should take the old play, ignore Mr Blakelock and put in the part of the stockbroker an actor who can look like Beachy Head and smoulder like Etna. One feels that Mr Blakelock's Charles would be back in the bosom of his family in three weeks. What I want to see is a player who could tear that family bosom to pieces and scatter it on the line from Wimbledon to Waterloo. I refer, of course, to Mr Alfred Drayton. And if this idea doesn't appeal to the commercial theatre, why doesn't it revive *Our Betters*, Mr Maugham's best play, with, of course, Mr Drayton in his original part? I don't suppose for a moment that the commercial theatre will take the slightest notice of my suggestion. Or of anybody's suggestion. It never does.

October 29, 1944

Salmagundi

ANGLO-RUSSIAN MERRY-GO-ROUND. Devised by

Eugene Iskoldoff

Adelphi

PRIVATE LIVES. (Revival.) By Noel Coward

Apollo

THERE is no reason that I can see why one should not have an Anglo-Patagonian Milk Supply Association. One would arrange this, I suppose, by assembling a number of Patagonians who should sell milk to an English clientèle. But the art, or shall I say the entertainment, world is different. Dostoievsky's *Idiot* interleaved with *The Diary of a Nobody* would not make a good Anglo-Russian novel. Nor should I consider

This is a spray the Bird clung to,
Would you like to swing on a star,
Making it blossom with pleasure,
Or carry moonbeams home in a jar?

a good Anglo-American lyric. Let me suggest to Mr Eugene Iskoldoff that the pleasantries of the Russian peasant and the sophisticated humours of the English low comedian do not blend, and cannot be made to blend by calling the thing an Anglo-Russian *mélange*, or anything else.

The ingredients of this gallimaufry are admirably intended. The music sets out to be musicianly, and mostly succeeds. There is some charming scenery, including a highly imaginative backcloth by Mr Alexander Bilibin suggesting the Ukraine in sunny mood. There is a great deal of heltering and skeltering, including a ballet in which Zeus turns himself into a bull for no ascertainable purpose since the rest is china-shop decorum. (A rogue in porcelain?) There is much commingling of Cossacks and gipsies, together with a great deal of Muscovite tra-la-la and what-have-you. Is it impossible to discover what emotions are being mimed, sung and danced?

Or even what language is being used? So much the better. *Ce qui est trop bête pour être chanté, on le danse*, as the Frenchman so nearly remarked.

To mitigate these exorbitances there is Mr George Lacy revelling in the old-time music-hall splendours of burlesque ballerina, opera-singer, and what-not. My considered view of this comedian is that he is a trifle more hilarious than either Mr Nervo or Mr Knox taken singly, while remaining a shade less funny than this pair taken together! By way of further palliation there is Miss Pat Leonard, who, titivated to the last degree of modern ingenuity and resource, sighs for the days when she was a child and the lanes down which she sped to school hand-in-hand with some grubby little horror. I remember a play by Mr Priestley in which one Lady Sybil Linchester—"Snoops" Linchester—babbled o' green fields and the buttercups and daisies she picked as a girl. This sort of thing leaves me cold. I infinitely prefer the one and only B. Lillie in her song about the chorus-girl who refused mink and asked only for a sun-bonnet and a summer-house in which to wear it and think about lost innocence. "You may as well leave them there," she sighed to the man-about-town who, in a moment of abstraction, had deposited a pair of diamond clips on the chorus-girl's dressing-table. Finishing with her childhood, Miss Leonard proceeds to tell us all about the "Gloree of the Storee of a Starree Night." And presently the evening, which has begun in the heart of the Steppes, ends up in Old Vienna, having looked in at Lillas Pastia's on the way.

Somebody said of Thomas and Jane Carlyle that it was a good thing they married because that meant two unhappy people in the world instead of four. The same may be said of Mr Coward's Elyot and Amanda, both of whom are delightful for the first five minutes and unbearable for the rest of the twenty-four hours. I find that about *Private Lives* I wrote fourteen years ago, "Whether the people in this play are vile or virtuous is not the touchstone here; they have a butterfly melancholy, and the only question is whether the playwright has given that melancholy its butterfly texture." Which only shows what nonsense one is capable of. I saw this play a month or two ago performed in a wooden hut some-

where in Sussex to an audience not, one thinks, appreciative of butterflies. The piece had been broadened a little and what texture there was left was that of a flea-bitten hunter's hide. And it brought the roof down, and everybody voted it to be tremendous fun, and during the scene of the row on the sofa the audience stamped and whistled and shouted "Go it, Elyot!" "Slosh 'im, Amanda!" I find that in 1930 I talked of this play's "world-weary banter." I ought to have had my brains taken out and buttered and given to a dog. That there could be anything world-weary about Mr John Clements or Miss Kay Hammond in the present revival is a tale to tell to the Marines, the Horse-marines or any other of Mr Kipling's "giddy harumfrodites."

November 5, 1944

A Well-meant Play

THE YEARS OF THE LOCUST. By Jonquil Antony
"Q"

ONE should always begin at the beginning. But I doubt whether Miss Jonquil Antony, when she sat down to write her play for women characters only, *The Years of the Locust*, had any idea that she was going to be taken back as far as Corneille. To the situation in *Le Cid* in which Chimène, learning that her father has been slain by her lover, urges upon the king the punishment of an audacious youth's presumption:

D'un jeune audacieux punissez l'insolence. . . .

(J'ever hear such stilted nonsense?) After which Chimène says to Elvire:

Pleurez, pleurez, mes yeux, et fondez-vous en eau.
La moitié de ma vie a mis l'autre au tombeau
Et m'oblige à venger, après ce coup funeste
Celle que je n'ai plus par celle qui me reste.

I translate: "Weep, weep, mine eyes, and dissolve yourselves in tears. The one half of my life [*i.e.*, my lover] has laid the other half [*i.e.*, my father] in the grave, and compels me to revenge, after this fatal blow, that which I have no more [*i.e.*, my father] on that which still remains to me [*i.e.*, my lover]." "Yes," says the reader impatiently, "but what has all this got to do with Miss Antony?" I am coming to that by and by. "By and by" is easily read.

We will now transfer our interest to an altogether different bird, one James Watt, who first remarked the power of steam to lift a kettle-lid. Little did that ingenious Scot realize that this piece of observation destroyed for ever one of the unities of the drama. Would James have said under his breath, "Pierre Corneille, whaur's your unity o' place the noo?" But then, as a Scot born in 1736, James's thoughts would not naturally turn to the playhouse; though it is true he might have seen Home's *Douglas* ("Whaur's

your Wullie, etc.") produced some seven years before the incident of the kettle. The reason that Corneille, Racine, and all that lot respected the unity of place is that they more or less had to. For their plots about tigresses passion-starved in Byzantine deserts the desert sufficed, because the tigress had no means of escape. But the steam-kettle changed all that, since from it came the steam-engine, which gave somebody the notion of the internal combustion engine, which gave birth to the aeroplane. Nowadays the heroine up to the neck in some issueless quandary has merely to shade her eyes with her hand and speak to wit and as follows: "What is this speck I see above the horizon? Is it? Yes. No. It can't be! It *is*!" And in the twinkling of an eye the British airplane with its gallant complement has effected the heroine's rescue to the dismay of the villainous quandarists. Shorthand for villains who put heroines into quandaries.

Miss Antony's heroine is presented early in the play with a dilemma far more agonizing than the author of *Le Cid* permitted himself to conceive. The scene is Amsterdam, the time winter, 1943. Charlotte van Rooyen (Miss Louise Hampton) receives a visit from Frau von Schregel (Miss Helen Haye), the wife of the head of the local Gestapo. She tells Charlotte that her son, Lieutenant von Schregel, has been paying court to Charlotte's younger daughter Mina. Whereupon Charlotte goes off into excusable hysterics. "Out of my house, vile daughter of Hitlerism!" sums up what *she* has to say. "Hold your tongue, silly woman!" says Frau von S. "My son cares nothing at all for your Mina; he has been using the silly chit as a means of getting to know your elder daughter Anna, to whom he proposes marriage in accordance with the Führer's policy of cementing Dutch friendship." "Cementing *what*?" shrieks Charlotte. "Besides, Anna has an airman husband who is probably alive." Whereupon the German lady continues imperturbably, "Your elder daughter Anna, whose husband's death will, of course, be presumed, will marry my son." "The hell she will!" says Charlotte. "Listen, you fool!" says her visitor. "If Anna refuses she will be taken by force, Mina will be sent to Germany for purposes we need not specify, and you, my dear Vrouw van Rooyen, will be shot."

What, then, should Anna do? Obviously she must either consent to the forced marriage which will save her mother's life and her sister's honour, or else she must stand firm and submit to outrage while unspeakable things happen to her family. Even if the arithmetic were not complicated by Mina's passion for the young officer it seems to me that here are compound fractions beyond anything in *Corneille*. But Anna is not allowed to know of this question of choice, and the piece peters out in that race for time we have seen so often on the films. Will the little boat waiting in the Dutch waterway get the two girls to safety before the discovery of Anna's bright notion of going to the German officer's apartment and murdering him? She botches the business only to learn that the attempt and not the deed confounds young ladies who mess about with daggers. In the meantime the old family retainer Betje (Miss Mary Clare) has been doing a much more skilful bit of work in the matter of Frau von Schregel, only to realize that in Nazi-occupied countries the deed is likely to prove as confounding as the attempt. I thought at this point that Miss Antony was a trifle over-scrupulous. Since we had the little boat, why not the little bomb? Only a little one, of course, but dropped on Police Headquarters by Anna's returning husband, scattering the Gestapo, and permitting the whole family to escape in the confusion.

Miss Hampton was heroically Gummidgean throughout. Apart from a complete failure to make us believe that there was anything Teutonic about her steely elegances, Miss Haye acted very finely indeed. As Mina and Anna respectively Miss Yvonne Owen and Miss Jeanette Tregarthen did what was required of them with something more than competence. And it only remains to say that the central figure in this well-meant but misguided business was Miss Mary Clare, who, as Betje, combined the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* with Emilia in *Othello* in remarkably effective fashion. And in sabots, too.

November 12, 1944

Theatre and Film

THINK of great whales. Of tumbling oceans. Of lazy, tropic beaches and feathery trees. Of mountain-tops that freeze. Of earthquakes and cataclysms. Of all the things the film can do magnificently and the theatre cannot look at. And then the time came when even the film-makers got tired of looking at it, and decided that there was more 'to' the pictures than the mere presentation of the outdoor and the outsize. Hence those warning shadows, those garrets under Paris roofs, that swirl of skirts above a dropped dance-programme, those enigmatic sledges, those equivocal glooms. The decision once taken that the pictures should cease being a paranoic panorama and become 'cinema,' the ensuing coquettings with famous novels were inevitable. Would *Mea Culpa* look well in Lydia Bennet's sprigged muslin? Would Dora Spenlow's coal-scuttle bonnet become Thea Culpa? Would Maxima Culpa shine at the Duchess of Richmond's ball? Of course. Wherefore these things came to pass. I have never been able to make out who's who in *Wuthering Heights*, but that did not prevent Mr Olivier from being extremely effective in the snow and among gorse. I was never able to get through *Gone with the Wind*, which did not prevent me from revelling in Miss Vivien Leigh's presentation of a high-mettled tulip.

Later the theatre was laid under contribution. And foolishly people said, "How Shakespeare would have welcomed the films!" quoting in support Chorus's

Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth.

Either Shakespeare wrote this in a hurry or he just wasn't an intellectual. Anyhow, a moment's reflection would have convinced him that when you can see horses prancing and curvetting there ceases to be any need to put that prancing and curvetting into words. Mr Neville Cardus once wrote of Woolley's off-drives that

they were "like butterflies going into the flame." But he was writing for a public which had not seen Woolley's innings. I had been with Cardus at Lord's that afternoon, and what he said was not "Look at that butterfly going into the flame," but "Well played, sir!" Consider *Hamlet*, and what an appalling amount of extraneous stuff the film will have to show if it is going to be something other than a mere photograph of the acted play. We shall be shown the young Fortinbras sharking up his lawless resolute, Claudius taking his rouse, the morn in Technicolor clad walking o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill, the glow-worm paling his uneffectual fire, what Danskers are in Paris, Hamlet's voyage to England, his first and last essay in pocket-picking, Ophelia pull'd to muddy death, with flashbacks showing Hamlet *père* sleeping in his orchard, and Yorick bearing Hamlet *filis* on his back.

I have seen three films made out of Shakespeare's plays, and all were disastrous. *Romeo and Juliet* showed the lady attended by forty tiring maids escorted by forty page-boys. The Montague-Capulet brawl had almost as many participants as the battle of Agincourt, and the entrance to the Capulet Tomb was at least as magnificent as the façade of Chartres Cathedral. I still have the programme. "Materials which would almost have built a small town went into the work. Sixty thousand square feet of plaster, 700,000 feet of heavy lumber, 35,000 square feet of composition board, 24,000 pounds of tiling." In the film of *As You Like It* Rosalind (the Bergner) turned head over heels, while in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Puck, peering through the bushes, was merely Mickey Rooney escaped from *Boys' Town*. On Wednesday next we are to see the film of *Henry V*, and my eminent colleague will tell us in what manner Mr Olivier has solved the triple insoluble—*i.e.*, the faithful interpretation of Shakespeare, the reconstruction of the thing as it actually happened, and the cinematic expression of both. The itch to reproduce A in terms of B knows no cure. Witness the cinema organist in full blast at something composed for the violinist, radio fiddlers scraping away at something composed for the piano, and concert pianists hammering out pieces devised for full orchestra, for example, the Overture to *Tannhäuser*. In my view it is partly this mania for transformation and partly the

paucity of original ideas which has driven Hollywood into its versions of stage plays. Here Hollywood resembles that sailor who, in the lady's novel, steering for both Scylla and Charybdis, was in danger of missing both. The essence of the theatre is that everything is happening in a small artificially lighted box; the essence of the cinema is that it has the whole daylight world to play about in. Scylla is the mere photographing of the play, in which case the cinema loses everything it stands for. Charybdis is going outside the play and showing you in action that which on the stage is merely related; this brings to nothing all the art and craft of play-making.

These desultory jottings are the result of a visit to the film *Old Acquaintance*, and I have been encouraged to set them down by my colleague's statement last week that she had not seen the play. Let me assure Miss Powell that in the theatre Mr Van Druten's comedy was reasonably exciting because it fulfilled expectations aroused in a theatre and because it was a comedy of good manners to which Miss Edith Evans brought a whole armoury of wit and irony, while Miss Marian Spencer, fortified by some preposterous hats, was the embodiment of delicious and fluffy riot. The film version made the play seem dull partly because, while happening in a cinema, it turned its back on the cinema's special qualities of change, variety, and excitement, and partly because it had been turned into a comedy of bad manners, Miss Bette Davis electing to make several appearances in a set of pyjamas lacking the lower half and indulging in the solecism, "Let you and I talk it over." (Shade of Millamant!) As for the goose-like little novelist, methought Miss Miriam Hopkins's performance the last word in tedium. Mesank my chin in melancholy. In other words, neither rock nor whirlpool brought disaster to this venture, which foundered in midstream out of sheer half-heartedness.

November 19, 1944

Hamlet Up-to-date

LOVE IN IDLENESS. By Terence Rattigan

Lyric

SOME years ago the Lunts—as they are admiringly and affectionately known—appeared in a comedy by one of those mid-European dramatists who contrive to be both outlandish and ultra-sophisticated. As this comedy unrolled itself one perceived that it was a re-statement of the old *Phaedra* theme. Euripides—Racine—Sil-Vara—Moellor. Strange ancestry! At this point I permit myself a quotation from Racine's Preface, in which that distinguished dramatist says naïvely, "Although I have ventured to deviate a little from the path traced by Euripides, I have not hesitated to enrich my piece with what seemed to me to be the most striking passages in his." Charming! As though some modern English playwright should show a modern hostess descending some modern staircase fast asleep, performing invisible ablutions, and murmuring, "All the perfumes of Belgravia will not sweeten this little hand."

It has been left to Mr Rattigan to think of *Hamlet* as a modern comedy. The Prince of Denmark is Michael Brown, the son of a suburban doctor who up to the time of his death had made a poorish living at Baron's Court. Gertrude is Olivia Brown, the boy's mother, now living in guilty splendour in Westminster as the wife in all but name of Sir John Fletcher, a rich industrialist brought into the Cabinet in order to superintend tank production. (Why don't they marry? Because Lady F. won't divorce Sir J.) Hamlet, now nearly eighteen, and sent to Canada at the beginning of the war, returns in the middle of the first act. A sucking-dove roaring left-wing principles, he disapproves of Sir John (*a*) as being part of the capitalist menace and (*b*) because of his relations with his mother. War is declared between the two, and the curtain descends after a first act of brilliantly inventive comedy and wit which comes out of character, out of situation, and even out of itself. Wit of the proliferous as opposed to the pepper-box variety. In the

interval one asked oneself what Mr Rattigan was going to do with his introspective young man ravaged by an Oedipus complex and revelling in self-dramatization. Well, what could this modern Hamlet do? He could, of course, and in the nice phraseology of to-day, "create a stink," and by revealing the carryings-on at Elsinore glut his private revenge and gratify his left-wing cronies by a scandal in high places. Alas, he did nothing except sulk and consult books about poisons. And what did Gertrude do? She decided never again to let the bloat Fletcher pinch wanton on her cheek or call her his mouse. In non-Shakespearean English she was for Baron's Court again, there to keep house for the moody little prig. Which, frankly, nobody in the theatre believed.

Even so, there was still time to make a play of it. Gertrude, you see, had had an odd moment of sincerity in the second act. She had loved Claudius apart from the frocks and the friends, the parties and the champagne, and could not help it if these things had become second nature with her. Would *she* tire of getting the boy his meals? Would *he* come to realize that life at Baron's Court isn't all beer and skittles, or rather that beer and skittles is just what life outside the three-mile radius is, and that they are not nearly such fun as fashionable restaurants and first-nights? Would Mr Rattigan give us the closet scene in reverse, with Gertrude beginning "Hamlet, thou hast thy would-be stepfather much offended," and ending by carrying the boy off in triumph to Elsinore Court to stay contentedly put? That would have been a play. There had been another moment when we thought that Hamlet was going to fall in love with Claudius's undivorcing wife. That too would have been a play. Why did Mr Rattigan refrain? Was it for the reason given by the over-delicate Racine? "Hippolyte is accused, both in Euripides and Seneca, of having solicited his stepmother. In my play I go no further than to make him the victim of a slander to this effect. I have wished to spare Thésée an embarrassment which might have rendered him less sympathetic to the audience." Did Mr Rattigan wish to spare Mr Lunt *une confusion* which must have had its ridiculous side?

Whatever the reason we were not vouchsafed this play either, and the comedy petered out in something designed, apparently, to

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display Mr Lunt's talent for persiflage. This was a mistake. Claudius, in this variant of *Hamlet* chosen by Mr Rattigan, has no place in the dramatic scheme after those bedroom-slippers have given him away, and should have been allowed to disappear. Is there precedent for this? There is. Shakespeare, having finished with Shylock, does not send him on in the fifth act to prove that he is as much of a wag as Gratiano. These things being said, let me insist with some firmness that anybody arriving at this play after the first act and seeing only the relatively disappointing remainder, must still have realized that here was writing for the theatre on a higher level than that to which Shaftesbury Avenue is normally accustomed.

Mr Lunt and Miss Fontanne were superb in the first act and good in the second; if their performances crumbled away at the end it was merely because the comedy had lost its sincerity. Mr Brian Nissen, who is remembered for a most moving performance as the soldier in the film of *Henry V*, was admirable as the callow youth. To render the charmless in terms of charm is a considerable feat, and this young actor achieved it.

December 24, 1944

Hands across the Sea

To tell you the truth, I'm blaze about the theatre," said a young Bloomsburyite to me the other day. "Come, that's interesting," I replied, "one of our young intellectuals practically on fire about the theatre—my dear fellow, it's very, very reassuring." He said coldly, "You don't get it. I'm *blaze* about the theatre. Fed-up. French, you know." And then I got it. This conversation came to mind as I was reading Mr George Jean Nathan's *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1943-1944* (Knopf, New York), on the cover of which Mr Thomas Quinn Curtiss reminds us that Mr Nathan "has fought long and hard for originality, honesty and dignity in the native drama, and with equal strength sought to combat the stranglehold that Puritanism, academicism and crass commercialism once exercised upon it." The cover is also adorned with the photograph of a portrait-bust of Mr Nathan looking about twenty-two, which is odd in view of the fact that he has been a dramatic critic for forty years. Which prompts one to ask: Has Mr Nathan become blaze? This book shows no sign of it except in the case of a theatrically effective little piece called *Murder without Crime*. This is described as "an imported English spasm," and finally dismissed as "sickly claptrap." Whereat I revise my opinion of Mr Nathan and murmur:

"What a most particularly blaze young man this blaze young man must be."

I gather from this excellent book that the American war-time theatre is very much the same as the English. Lots of money being made; stress on 'entertainment'; few if any plays of real quality. Taking Mr Nathan as guide, the only play I want to see over here is our own Van Druten's *The Voice of the Turtle*. So much for the straight plays.

But there is one musical piece that I confess I should very much like to see. This is *Carmen Jones*, and I read that it is "a modern paraphrase of the Bizet opera by Oscar Hammerstein 2nd in the

way of the libretto and lyrics, and by Robert Russell Bennett in the orchestral arrangements." After jumping into the thick of controversy with the statement that "Racine was not particularly successful in achieving paraphrases of the Greek drama, nor Gerhart Hauptmann in his attempt to paraphrase the Elizabethan," Mr Nathan goes on to tell us that the story has been adapted to the negroes of the American South and Chicago. I confess that I cannot wait to see and hear this adaptation. I want to know what happens when Carmen becomes a worker in a parachute factory; Don José a soldier named Joe; Michaela Cindy Lou, a girl from his home town; and Escamillo Husky Miller, a champion prize-fighter. "There is," I read, "no travesty; the fable of passion and the tragedy it leads to is allowed to retain its elementary complexion." And I should like to hear Mr Bennett's "artfully manœuvred rhythms which do no violence to the originals yet which are so perfectly suited to the new libretto that they seem to have been born simultaneously with it." I understand that *there has been no interpolation*. Here Mr Nathan puts his finger on the crux and gist of the whole matter of translation (*a*) from one medium to another, and (*b*) within the same medium. Some day Hollywood will film *Carmen*. This will begin in some opera house and transfer itself to the open air and the Lillas Pastia country. We shall then be given all the things that the opera keeps from us, including a brilliantly photographed *corrida*. We shall see the matadors with their knees a-knocking and their toes a-rocking, repairing after the fight to the smugglers' tavern, there to dance with the cigarette-girls with the holes in their stockings pending the arrival of Escamillo telling Carmen that he is a Chocolate Soldier from the U.S.A. Whereupon Carmen will sing *It hadda be You* with rather less management of rhythm than a baby sucking a jujube. Before that film blots out the light of day I should like to see this exercise which has not added Jones to Carmen but transposed Carmen into the idiom and key of Jones. As I understand Mr Nathan, the thing is a work of art consistent with itself, conceived on one plane and sticking to it.

And now I have a confession to make. One is human. Some years ago one protested in the columns of the *Sunday Times* against

the excessive adulation heaped on a foreign actress on the strength of a single performance. One read notices in which the actress was compared favourably with Mrs Siddons, Rachel, Bernhardt, and Duse. One wrote an article asking what is a great actress, and whether the supreme hall-mark should not be reserved for players who had proved their greatness in a succession of great plays? One was received with a volley of abuse, which, as Mrs Gamp would say, lambs could not forgive or worms forget. Now, I repeat, one is human; one likes corroboration, and here is Mr Nathan's:

Elisabeth Bergner, the celebrated German actress, once again brought American critics to ponder on the high estate she occupied in her native land in the pre-Hitler period. Although she indicated some improvements over her absurdly artificial performance of eight years ago in *Escape Me Never* she still failed to suggest that, direction or not, she understands in the least how to incorporate her own histrionism into the compositional flow of a play and not allow it to become mere intrinsic solo exhibitionism.

One will never forget being entertained to luncheon by the New York dramatic critics and telling them to their faces that Maxwell Anderson's *High Tor*, to which they had just awarded the Critics' Circle prize, was pure highbrow tosh. It is reassuring to read seven years later that:

No man writing for our theatre has greater sincerity than Anderson, and no man a higher goal. But none, also, has a mind more critically incapable of meeting the demands it imposes upon itself and none presents himself so in the light of a stuffy college professor trying to mix with the boys and have himself accepted as a good fellow. His excursions into worldly philosophy have a classroom ring, and his efforts at daring humour give the impression of a schoolmaster on the loose after one beer.

And here I must leave a brilliantly witty book by a critic about whom I have been for many years, and still practically am, on fire. My incandescence would have been smokeless if the author had

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expressed greater indignation at the fact that the Boston Comic Opera Company, now calling itself the Gilbert and Sullivan Opera Company, playing in quite small theatres, uses microphones and loud-speakers to amplify the voices of the singers! Come, George, don't be so blaze. Tell us the punishment to fit that crime!

December 31, 1944

Reality and Pretence

THE YEARS BETWEEN. By Daphne du Maurier
Wyndham's

PROPINQUITY! I spent the first hour of this play wondering what service Humpty Dumpty would have imposed on that word. The drama now unfolding was all about Diana, an English war widow (Nora Swinburne) whose husband, Colonel Wentworth, M.P. (Clive Brook), had crashed off the coast of Greece. Alas, I had just come from a film about an American war widow whose husband had been reported missing in the Philippines, and I found myself asking whether to tackle the make-believe of the theatre so soon after the actualities of the film was quite fair. If this might be taken as the meaning of "propinquity," then Humpty Dumpty, I decided, would have given the word a pat and an extra half-crown. Some years ago I was told by a chauffeur that he preferred the pictures to the theatre "because they are so much more real." Was the young man setting up a case for celluloid as more life-like than flesh-and-blood? No, what he was stressing without knowing it was the difference between a photograph of, say, an express train speeding through steam and rain and Turner's painting of the same thing. At the cinema I am, like that chauffeur, completely illuded. I had no doubt the other morning that the American film company had paid some world-famous star 100,000 dollars to be unseen as the husband and do a thinking part away from the set. Indeed, I should not have been surprised to hear that they had given him another 100,000 dollars to go to the Philippines, crawl about, and pretend to be missing. I *felt* that the fellow was alive somewhere, tucked away, out of sight. I believed in him though I never saw him.

But then I utterly believe in the cinema unless, of course, it is behaving cinematographically. When some highbrow director films me a guttering candle and tells me it is Colonel Newcome rehearsing his *Adsum* I just say, "No, it isn't; it's a guttering candle." And when he shows me a view of a beach at low water

and claims that it is Barkis going out with the tide I say, "No, it isn't; it's a bit of Ilfracombe." But otherwise I am, I repeat, completely illuded. As a filmgoer I have not been taught to pretend; whoever alludes to a rogue elephant or to a volcano in eruption must show it to me, and will. Whereas the whole art of playgoing is concerned with pretence. And alas, I could not believe in this play's colonel, in spite of the fact that he was tremendously in evidence.

Miss du Maurier does not help by starting off with a whopper. Or rather, three whoppers. First, we are to believe that Colonel Wentworth didn't really crash but only pretended to, so that nobody would suspect him of being chief organizer of the underground movement in Europe. Second, we are to believe that Diana is not allowed to know any of this because she is Ibsen's Nora all over again, a tweeting song-bird who is to chirrup all over the house except when her lord and master is at his desk writing his books and speeches. Third, we are to believe that, his mission concluded and the war ended, the Colonel returns to find the canary turned bird of wisdom and representing the constituency in his stead! Well, I don't think Miss du Maurier can have it all three ways any more than I believe that a heroine wearing three rows of whacking great pearls cares threepence whether working-class houses are provided with baths or not. In the meantime Diana has become engaged to Richard Llewellyn (Ronald Ward), a charming gentleman-farmer who knows all about tractors and fly-fishing. Eventually we get to a lot of chaffering among the magnanimities, and finally the Colonel accepts the Government's offer to return abroad and look after the new Germany. Whereupon Diana, who has become the complete Mrs Pardiggle, proposes to devote the next few years to seeing that the working classes take baths—one gathers by forcible immersion if necessary—and Richard decides to start farming on Cader Idris. Whereby we conclude that, in the words of John Worthing, a passionate celibacy is all that any of the trio can look forward to.

The best thing in the play is the Colonel's gloomy insistence upon a point of view which I have heard more fully argued. This is that the soldier doesn't want to come back to an unrecognizable

world, a world with hot and cold laid on everywhere, a world in which chamber music and poetry readings in saloon bars interfere with the proper business of drinking. He wants the world he knew improved, if you must, but *along his lines* and not what the Pardiggles think ought to be his lines. A world of better and stronger beer; of higher wages and fewer hours; of more dependable horses and more reliable greyhounds; of larger and more palatial dance-halls. A world in which a wife stops at home and wipes her kiddies' noses instead of gadding about Westminster trying to catch the Speaker's eye. Right or wrong, this new argument, very forcefully put by the Colonel, seems to me to be of greater interest than that stale romantic stuff about the lover who goes out of a woman's life. But then I had spent the morning weeping over one abnegatory fellow, and two in one day is too much. Propinquity again. The piece is extremely well acted by the above-named principals. In connection with another character I am reminded of the story of a famous actress who invited a well-known actor to join her Repertory Company, which she declared was to be conducted on the Russian principle. "In one production I shall play Lady Macbeth; in the next I shall just carry a tray." The actor replied, "I know that tray. It has John the Baptist's head on it!" Miss Henrietta Watson brings in the Wentworth tea-things with the air of Racine's Andromaque about to bewail something or other in twenty-six Alexandrines; in other words she is too good an actress to carry a tray. There is a brilliantly assured performance of a small boy by Master John Gilpin. When this young gentleman next doth act abroad, may I be there to see!

January 14, 1945

Nature and the Actor

UNCLE VANYA. By Tchekhov
New

IN her book on the Art of the Theatre Sarah Bernhardt recounts how she heard Coquelin complain of his want of success in the rôle of Jean d'Acier. A friend said, "My dear fellow, you are admirable in simulating passion and emotion, but your nose does you an injustice. It is too comical for words." I have a perfect recollection of Coquelin as Cyrano, and remember my astonishment at remaining completely dry-eyed at the death scene. But then Coquelin belonged to the school which says that an actor must simulate and not feel, with the result, said Sarah, that "the public remained cold before the sentiments of despair that Coquelin, faithful to his method, expressed without feeling." It seems to me that only half the case is stated here. Suppose Coquelin had retained the comic mask while being lachrymosity's self. Would he then have moved his audience? I think yes, but that the grief would have remained that of a comic personage.

Sarah goes on:

There is a fitness of things intellectual, and a fitness of things physical, and the latter should receive as much attention as the former. If it be an excellent principle of government to allot each man to his post and adapt his employment to his capabilities, it is an even more admirable rule for the theatre. But accurate discernment, especially when turned by an individual on himself, is one of the rarest qualities in the world.

And her advice to the actor is to play only those parts which his physical characteristics and his appearance do not enjoin him to refuse. "What!" cries the actor. "Am I not to be actor enough to pretend the physical things that I am not?" The answer, except in the case of outstanding genius, is a plain, blunt No. Sarah recounts how, at the beginning of her career, she herself failed

ludicrously because of the neglect of this rule, while excusing herself on the ground that it was Perrin, the director of the Comédie Française, who neglected it for her. The piece was Octave Feuillet's *Dalila*.

Perrin's distribution was entirely *cocasse*. He allotted to me the rôle of the dark and ferocious Dalila, while giving Croizette the rôle of the pure, idealistic maiden doomed to an early death.

In order to give some idea of Feuillet's haughty and voluptuous siren I filled out my hips with horsehair and my corsage with wadding, over the top of which peered my thin, anxious little "mug." Croizette, on the other hand, swathed and constricted her opulent bosom with bands which made it almost impossible for her to speak, but could do nothing about her pretty, laughing, dimpled face. I was compelled to force my voice, Croizette to reduce hers. The whole thing was absurd, and the piece foundered.

"And pray," asks the reader, "what has all this to do with *Uncle Vanya*?" Simply that while Mr Richardson can and does *act* Uncle V. magnificently, I do not think he can *be* Tchekov's character. And I hold that it is Nature's fault and not his. An actor may be admirable as Sir Toby and not begin to be Sir Andrew, play Falstaff superbly and be a wretched Shallow. The greatest actor I ever saw was Irving. Even the Hamlet of my mind's eye must have failed as Claudius, despite the immensities of skill he would have brought to the part. Irving would have failed because he would not, and could not, have been "bloat." Whatever H. I. did was subtle—grossness must always have escaped him. But to get back to Mr Richardson. "His spirit shines through him." I see this actor as bluff rather than wily, as a doer rather than as a thinker, extrovert rather than introvert, a go-getter rather than a *fainéant*. I can see this fine player as Bottom the Weaver or the Bastard in *King John*. As Henry but not Wolsey. I can see him as Macbeth hanging out banners on outward walls, facing Hyrcan tigers and all the rest of it. I can see him as Hamlet bracing each petty artery to the hardness of the Nemean lion's nerve. I just cannot see him "to-morrow and to-morrow"-ing or "to be or

not to be"-ing. In short, I cannot see Mr Richardson throwing up the sponge or chucking in his hand, and the whole point of Vanya is that he never does anything else, and is horribly sorry for himself that this should be so. "Floored for the present, sir, but jolly!" said Mark Tapley. "Floored for life, sir, and jolly miserable!" is what Uncle Vanya takes three acts to say. And I just cannot believe in Mr Richardson wallowing in misery; his voice is the wrong colour.

Nevertheless I hasten to salute a brilliant piece of sheer acting. And, of course, I may be all wrong about this. Tchekhov is a rum bird; did he not declare *The Cherry Orchard* to be a farce? It may be that to conceive Vanya as a figure of drenched melancholy is pure English sentimentality, that he is meant not as ineffectual angel but as Eternal Dummkopf. In which case Mr Richardson would be magnificently right, and the other Vanyas one has seen have all been wrong. I feel that this is neither the time nor the place for an essay on the difference between the Russian and English interpretations of farce. Mental disarray versus debagging. Let us agree that Mr Richardson is, anyhow, grandly Russian. Mr Olivier gives a magnificently witty and feeling performance of Astrov, and Mr Harcourt Williams as Serebryakov puts up an authoritative and amusing performance. Perhaps it is not quite fair to Mesdames Margaret Leighton and Joyce Redman that they should be called upon to play Yelena and Sonya quite so soon after Mesdames Joan Swinstead and Vivienne Bennett, both of whom were perfectly served by nature as well as art. Yelena at the New Theatre merely pretends to languor; one feels that the young woman is jolly enough really. While Sonya, talking about the restfulness of the grave, is still only talking; we feel that there are lots of fun waiting for her when she grows up.

January 21, 1945

No Fairies for Titania

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM. By William Shakespeare
Haymarket

LET us be entirely, insistently logical in the attempt to find an answer to the question why, on Thursday night, there were no fairies at the bottom of the Haymarket. Had they, on our account as well as their own, taken offence because Mendelssohn had once more been cold-shouldered? But that cannot have been the entire cause for the reason that a good proportion of any theatrical audience is tone-deaf. This has even applied to dramatic critics. I don't believe that either Archer or Walkley would have known the Overture to *The Dream* from the Overture to *Ruy Blas*, the Nocturne from *O Rest in the Lord*, and the Scherzo from the last movement of the Violin Concerto.

Now the fact that a dramatic critic cannot distinguish between the Trio in *Rosenkavalier* and *Three Little Maids from School* has never been known to prevent him from having views on what music should or should not be used for Shakespeare's fairy play. He will hold, as likely as not, that one should use "the music of the period," by which he generally means Purcell, ignoring the fact that that composer is first heard of in Pepys' Diary some forty-five years after Shakespeare's death. To those who are not tone-deaf the argument that music vaguely of the period *must* express that period is, I think, unsound. Unsound because we are not listening with the ears of that period. I hold that Richard Strauss gives to modern ears a better notion of the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon than any concatenation of conch, ram's horn, harp, pipe, lute, theorbo, shawm, sackbut, psaltery, tabor, and cymbals that Euripides could have heard. There is no reason in logic why a seventeen-year-old Hamburg Jew should throw open a door at which British music, up to his time, had pushed in vain. If you are to translate into prose:

The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees,
And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs,
And light them at the fiery glow-worm's eyes,
To have my love to bed and to arise;
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies,
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes:

you might do it perhaps in terms of dew-pearl'd spiders' webs and dragon-flies glinting in the sun. But however you did it your translation would have to shimmer. And I say that a dozen men of letters sitting in conclave for ten years would not produce anything so full of insects' wings as Mendelssohn's Scherzo. So it was in music until 1843, the year of the Scherzo. Pile Wilbye on Weelkes, throw in Byrd and that good composer Henry VIII, and there is not a shimmer among the lot; whatever other gates they may have thrown open, they did not open the door to Shakespeare's fairyland.

And perhaps they didn't try. Nobody else has tried since, and succeeded. And to do composers justice they have mostly refrained from trying. Is it not significant that, whereas Berlioz, Tschai-kowsky, and Ambroise Thomas handled in some sort *Hamlet*; Locke, Verdi, and Milhaud *Macbeth*; Rossini, Verdi, and Coleridge-Taylor *Othello*; and Nicolai, Verdi, Elgar, and Vaughan Williams the plays enshrining Falstaff, no composer, great or little, has dared to lay a finger on that play which Mendelssohn with four chords made his own for ever? What I cannot understand is why, if our highbrows will not have Mendelssohn, they must go backward. Why not forward? Why not create a modern fairyland with *décor* by Picasso and music by Béla Bartók? The cast? Oberon, Walter Crisham; Puck, Tommy Trinder; Bottom, Sid Field; Titania, Hermione Gingold.

But to return to our logic. None of the foregoing can have had weight with anybody in Thursday's audience who did not know "Baal, we cry to thee," from a Song Without Words. How, to these, the tone-deaf, would one explain the absence of the fairies? Because explain it one must. Is the key to be found in Oberon's "We are spirits of another sort," and the fact that Mr Gielgud's Oberon while being a spirit of another sort had not chosen the

right sort? A colleague has called this Oberon "sinister." I shall only say that I found the Fairy King terrifying with a make-up like the ghost of Hamlet's father at his most "unhousel'd, unanointed, unaneled"; indeed, I felt that he treated Titania as Mr Murdstone treated Clara. And then there was Puck. Mr Max Adrian is a brilliantly clever actor, who never fails to delight me. I remember his witty cozenings as Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida*, and the superb fatuousness of his Sir Ralph Bloomfield Bonington in *The Doctor's Dilemma*. If I were casting a play about Dr Johnson he would be my first choice for Boswell. But I submit that none of these is Shakespeare's fourteen-year-old leading his victims "through bog, through bush, through brake, through brier." Mr Adrian did brilliantly of course. But it was the garish brilliance of a Mordikin or a Nijinsky putting on a rehearsed glitter to hide the fatigue of a world-tour of *Petrouchka* followed by *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*.

The setting was magnificent, the quartet of lovers was as little of a bore as is humanly possible, the clowns were admirable, and everybody pulled his weight. But in spite of all this the fairies absented themselves, with the possible exception of Titania, who looked like an immortal, and doubtless felt like one. But, alas, Miss Ashcroft must have forgotten that she was speaking to mortal ears, and so was heard with some difficulty. Not because she did not speak loud enough, but because she was inclined to run her words together. There is no line in Shakespeare which reads

Andwhensheweepsweepseverylittleflower.

May I suggest that, exquisite though her performance is, this charming actress does too much, as her author puts it, tie up her love's tongue?

January 28, 1945

The "Dream" Again

A CORRESPONDENT writes to suggest that the reason for not using Mendelssohn's music at the revival of the *Dream* at the Haymarket may be the inability of that theatre to house the necessary orchestra. Whereupon I have a look at the score, and find that Mendelssohn stipulates eight wood-wind, two horns, two trumpets, one ophicleide and tympani, with the addition of a third trumpet, three trombones and cymbals in the Wedding March. To balance this, I suppose that a minimum of at least twenty-three strings would be required—making a total of forty-two performers. Next I ring up a first-class musician and distinguished conductor and ask him whether the Mendelssohn is feasible in a small theatre. He says, "If I had to conduct it in a theatre the size of the Haymarket I should re-score for a small orchestra consisting of eight violins, two violas, two 'cellos, one double bass, five wood-wind, two horns, two trumpets, one brass tuba, one percussion and cymbals, twenty-four players in all, since the tympanist would double the cymbals. A musician must cut his coat according to his cloth, like everybody else." I say, "Could you get twenty-four players into the Haymarket pit?" He replies, "When Norman O'Neill conducted his own music to *Mary Rose* he had an orchestra of twenty-two, including a harp and a grand piano. Yes, I could squeeze in twenty-four players very nicely!" It's the old story. Where there's a Mendelssohn will there's a Mendelssohn way.

Hazlitt declared that this play when acted "converted a delightful fiction to a dull pantomime." Perhaps there should be a special theatre built for it like the one Gautier demanded for his version of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which he proposed to call *Comme il vous plaira*:

This theatre of my fancy is one of the oddest. Glow-worms take the place of footlights; a beetle beating time with his antennae presides at the conductor's desk; a cricket leads the violins; a nightingale is first flute; tiny sylphs emergent from the chalices

of sweet peas and holding 'cellos of lemon-peel between their ivory knees draw across strings made of spiders' webs bows silkier than the lashes of Titania's eyes. After the *trois coups* a curtain of butterflies' wings rises slowly. The audience is composed of the souls of poets cushioned in stalls of mother-of-pearl; they regard the spectacle through dew-drops mounted on the lily's golden pistils; these are their opera-glasses.

If we cannot re-build our theatres we can at least re-model our casts. "Fairies are not incredible, but fairies six foot high are so"—again Hazlitt. What is wanted is probably a cast of children for the fairies, and for a very special reason. This is bound up with Quiller-Couch's suggestion for a setting of this play:

The set scene should represent a large Elizabethan hall, panelled, having a lofty oak-timbered roof and an enormous staircase. The cavity under the staircase, occupying in breadth two-thirds of the stage, should be fronted with folding or sliding doors, which, being opened, should reveal the wood, recessed, moonlit, with its trees upon a flat arras or tapestry. On this secondary remoter stage the lovers should wander through their adventures, the fairies now conspiring in the quiet hall under the lantern, anon withdrawing into the woodland to befool the mortals straying there.

In one respect I differ from Q.-C.; I would confine the little people to their woodland cave until the end, when, the life-size mortals having gone to bed, they should swarm over the entire stage.

It is many years since I saw a Christmas production of this play at the old Queen's Theatre in Manchester. There was something that looked like grass, and there were undoubtedly real goats and a real stream with, as Allan Monkhouse said, probably real fish in it. "Anyhow at the end of the proceedings a real Mr Flanagan came forward and thanked a real audience for its reception."

To conclude this business. There is only one kind of realism permissible in this play—the one given to it by the poet, a realism which Mendelssohn's music perfectly embodies. That composer may have been the excuse for orgies of witless staging—he is no

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more responsible for them than Shakespeare is responsible for the atrocities of cutting inflicted on him by Augustin Daly and others. So let "Back to Mendelssohn" henceforward be the producer's motto. Back to that score which is still, as it always was, "the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves."

February 4, 1945

Jane's Thin Gruel

EMMA. Adapted from Jane Austen's novel by Gordon Glennon
St James's

I find it hard to forgive anyone who lays hands on a novel of Jane Austen's.
A. B. WALKLEY

JANE'S "two inches of ivory" has never deceived me. She was a whale for length; it would take a hoarding twelve feet by six to hold the 444 small-print pages of my edition of *Emma*. The point? Simply that no Janeite would find it extraordinary that the public should be driven into the roadway to enable him to peruse, without interruption, on step-ladders and through magnifying glasses, this opusculum in all but length, having for centre a work-basket and for circumference the wall of a gentleman's park. There is no *balzacien déterminé*, in Paul Bourget's phrase, who will not grant you out of the 2500 characters in the *Comédie Humaine* at least 200 unreadables. Whereas the Janeite *enragé* insists upon perfection everywhere.

Walkley endorsed Miss Thackeray's statement that "Jane's very bores are enchanting." And I summon up my entire stock of moral courage and declare that Miss Bates is as boring to read about as to live with. Let us look at a famous passage:

Indeed they are very delightful apples, and Mrs Wallace does them full justice, only we do not have them baked more than twice, and Mr Woodhouse made us promise to have them done three times. . . . The apples themselves are the very finest sort for baking, beyond a doubt; all from Donwell—some of Mr Knightley's most liberal supply. He sends us a sack every year; and certainly there never was such a keeping apple anywhere.

Whereupon I turn to another and a livelier bore:

In Italy is she really with the grapes and figs growing everywhere and lava necklaces and bracelets too that land of poetry with burning mountains picturesque beyond belief though if the organ-boys come away from the neighbourhood not to be

scorched nobody can wonder being so young. . . . Venice Preserved too I think you have been there is it well or ill preserved for people differ so . . . you are acquainted Arthur I believe with Mantua what *has* it got to do with Mantua-making for I never have been able to conceive.

Thus Flora Finching.

The truth is, I suppose, that Dickens's gusto and Jane's fastidiousness are as oil and vinegar—the difference between a gormandizer and a governess. Walkley goes on to splutter, "The fact is, people who are bored by Jane Austen's bores are probably bored by Jane herself. We are not all born with a sense of humour. . . ." But that cock won't fight. I am not bored by Jane's bores *en masse*. I dote, for example, on Mr Collins. But then Collins is outrageous and amusing, whereas Miss Bates is a *flat* bore, a bore set down literally and unheightened. "Why, Sir," said Dr Johnson, "if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted you would hang yourself." It was obviously useless on Wednesday night to look to the stage for happenings, since in the book there are none. This is a world without war, famine, pestilence, religion, politics, tempest, bankruptcy or sudden death. No children are born; nothing on Mr Martin's farm foals or calves. If the evening was saved at all it was saved by Miss Bates!

I have always thought that the model for this is Jean Cadell's Miss Shoe. Miss Gillian Lind preferred to suggest Miss Tox with the addition of St Vitus's dance, and did most amusingly; to her fell the evening's one moment of emotion, despite the handicap of a turban straight out of *Chu Chin Chow*. A life-line was also thrown by Miss Ambrosine Phillpotts, who, as Mrs Elton, stormed that drawing-room at Hartfield House very much as Miss Snevellicci might have stormed the Dedlocks' drawing-room at Chesney Wold. (Yes, reader, I know I am telescoping two books.) But nothing availed. The walking, stalking, and talking gentlemen, led by Mr Frank Allenby's Mr Knightley, walked and stalked and talked whenever Emma could be persuaded to stop posing and prinking and prattling. Which brings me to Miss Neagle. Emma is a snob and a fool: Miss Neagle seemed to prefer to look upon her as a fluttering creature of delight. And so, to this actress's many ad-

mirers, she probably is, my own view being that her art needs the camera.

The décor and dresses were handsome, there was a brouhaha of belles and bonnetry, a frou-frou of frills and femininity, and any amount of whatever is the Austenese for "lawks-a-mussying." Mr Gordon Glennon, who adapted, did all he could. But why, oh why, didn't he arrange to be the exception to the rule that those who insist on dramatizing the undramatic are always the slowest in dropping the curtain? Or did he bethink him of that Henry James story of which Chesterton said that "the excitement becomes tense, thrilling and almost intolerable in all the half-hours during which nothing is said or done"? As I left the theatre the voice of Flora whispered over my shoulder, "Macaroni if they really eat it like the conjurors why don't they cut it shorter?"

February 11, 1945

A Word to Mr Wolfit

MACBETH. By William Shakespeare
Winter Garden

LAURA. By Vera Caspary and George Sklar
St Martin's

MR WOLFIT has publicly announced that his object is "to build new names, not to trade in established reputations," and pleads on behalf of his company that they are prepared to travel anywhere and everywhere. But the fact that an actor will nightly and cheerfully pitch his moving tent a day's march further off has nothing at all to do with his qualifications as an actor, while in the matter of new names Mr Wolfit must be told that too few of his young players show enough of that talent out of which names can be made. One will mangle the verse, another will pitch his voice ear-splittingly, and so on. It may be that Mr Wolfit has sought the aid of every young player of talent in the country. But the public cannot know this and, not being given to strict logic, is likely to confuse being continuously surrounded by indifferent players with the wish to be so surrounded.

The fact that Mr Wolfit cannot play Macbeth is neither here nor there, since many great actors have failed in the part. If Lear is often regarded as unactable—a misconception which Mr Wolfit has superbly refuted—it is because it is held that an actor's momentum *in a single direction* cannot be as great as Shakespeare's. If Macbeth is unactable it is on the more reasonable supposition that it is not given to a player to be in the maximum degree and simultaneously extrovert and introvert. (I have seen one first-class Macbeth and one only—Benson. Benson was a superb Henry V and an exquisite Richard II, and his Thane was the result of adding the two together.) Mr Wolfit's Macbeth fails because the character does not lie in the actor's personality. Because no actor can be Macbeth who deprives him of his poetry, introspection, vacillation, remorse. "Be bloody, bold, and resolute!" enjoins the Apparition.

But then Mr Wolfit is already bloody, bold and resolute, and has been so from the beginning.

The character goes wrong from the start. From the words "Duncan comes here to-night," followed by Lady Macbeth's "And when goes hence?" This is the first in a long time ("What beast was't *then*," etc.) that murder has been mentioned between them, and now the impetus comes from the lady, who in her immediately preceding speech has already settled the business in her own mind. ("Father is in the study praying for guidance; mother is upstairs packing.") Murder is as yet only at the back of Macbeth's mind ("My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical"), which means that there should be no more than the glimmer of a possibility behind the words "To-morrow, as *he purposes*." But this is not our Macbeth's notion. At his wife's question he disengages himself, steps back a pace, goes through prodigies of winking and nodding which would stagger the blindest horse, and incidentally ruins Lady Macbeth's "O never shall sun that morrow see!" In the scene which immediately follows, the colloquy between Lady M. and Duncan, I find no justification for Macbeth being present, veiling his face with his arm. The Thane of Cawdor is a First Murderer, not a Third! In short Mr Wolfit turns the whole play into a ranting, roaring, Saturday night melodrama, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing of the play's pity and melancholy. Only the most complete insensitvity could condone that jolly little march tune which heralds the fatal entrance of Duncan under the battle-ments and suggests that the play to follow is something about "Merrie Scotland."

Another occasion must serve on which to discuss Miss Patricia Jessel, in her twenties and possessed of some talent. But Lady M. demands an actress in the forties and able to look and be the part before she opens her mouth. Even before her partner trumped her ace it was obvious that the newcomer's hand was not strong enough. It wants more than intelligence and careful recitation to people the stage with "sightless substances."

About *Laura* (St Martin's) one asks: Does a would-be murderer shoot somebody without making sure that he has got hold of the right person? Does a young woman whose fiancé has a mistress lend

her apartment to her rival and then disappear? Does a "woman-thrope," to use Miss Prism's convenient neologism, commit murder because one of the sex to which he is allergic won't have him? Do American detectives investigate a crime by making love to the suspected criminal over her coffee and cookies? As a plain dramatic critic I just wouldn't know the answers. What I do know is that it was a pity to omit some of the original novel's dialogue. "The magnificence of my skeleton is hidden by the weight of my flesh." "I leaped like a mother leopard." "Aunt Susan once sang in musical comedy. Then she became a widow. The hyphen of marriage is best forgotten."

The acting was probably very good. Mr Raymond Lovell, trying hard to believe in his rôle, scattered tenth-rate epigrams with gusto. Messrs Robert Beatty, Peter Hammond and Leslie Bradley in better-written parts contrived a certain naturalness. And as the incredible Laura, a writer of advertising slogans with a passion for hot jazz and a knack equal to Helen's for turning men's heads, Miss Sonia Dresdel swept the stage in blood-red negligés and the eager vivacity of a leading actress who is what she calls "resting." But then this is the theatre whose audiences expect acting, and not the cinema where to look on catastrophe sympathetically, glamorously, and with the sweet simplicity of a boiled haddock is the most that is demanded by Streatham, Finchley, and what is known as "practically Ealing."

February 18, 1945

The Nature of Farce

MADAME LOUISE. By Vernon Sylvaine
Garrick

FARCE is not comedy produced to absurdity in the Euclidean sense, any more than man is an extension of monkey in what the layman takes to be the Darwinian sense. As I understand it, both humans and simians stem out from the same tree but on different sides of it, and possibly the first is a little higher up the trunk than the second. Wherefore 'production,' while it may mean sillier and sillier men and wiser and wiser monkeys, can never fuse the two. The same with comedy and farce. May I say that I have invented a rule which works for me, though I can find no authority for it and claim none? Set down in simple terms, the rule is: Comedy treats of unreal—*i.e.*, heightened—persons in real situations; farce deals with real persons in unreal situations. Never was any real-life old gentleman so testy as Sir Peter Teazle, uncle so benevolent as Sir Oliver, scapegrace so heart-warming as Charles Surface, hypocrite so plausible as Joseph. Immerse these in a plot, and the enjoyment comes from the deployment of character.

In farce it works the other way. The finest example in the English language—and but for Wilde's literary snobbery according with his astrakhan collar and that ubiquitous silk hat without which he was never photographed, this masterpiece would have been labelled a farce instead of a comedy however trivial—is *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which shows how perfectly normal people behave when confronted with handbags stuffed with babies. Wherefore two things follow. The richer the comedy the more flamboyant the playing can afford to be; the more preposterous the farce the more solemn must be its enacting. Every character in Sheridan's masterpiece must abound in its sense of itself, revel in its own gusto, and show that it is revelling; let Lady Bracknell betray consciousness of her absurdity by so much as the flutter of an eyelid, and that gorgeous vessel founders. There are, of course, an

enormous number of so-called farces having to do with the behaviour of unreal persons in unreal situations. These, being mere concatenations and conglomerations of buffoonery and horseplay, are not matter for critical consideration.

The players in Mr Sylvaine's witty farce justify every word of the foregoing. Mr Alfred Drayton is more than a bookie from Brighton; he is every bookie from every racecourse in the country. Similarly Mr Robertson Hare is every Little Man from Mr Polly to Strube's creation. Every homunculus who in the fell clutch of circumstance has winced but not cried aloud; I have no doubt that his prototype was known to Bunyan. Drayton is towering and tremendous; Hare fawns and cringes. Yes, the characters are real enough; it is with the imbroglio that fantastication sets in. For the gods in their sport have decided that Drayton shall take over a derelict gown-shop and in the guise of Madame Louise join forces with Hare, who has failed as a gown-salesman. Drayton is burdened with more things than the conduct of a clouded concern. His urgent desire to escape from the leader of a gang of racecourse toughs leads him to assume a geranium "smoking," a plastered auburn wig, and the air of a Bourbon vanquished by the Aesthetic Movement, and subsequently the prune-coloured velvet confection of your purple-faced, cerulean-haired dowager.

And that is not all. "The thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?" The Brighton bookie has a very present wife, so insistent and clamorous that the flagstones outside Madame Louise's front door prate continually of her whereabouts. (Another excellent performance by Miss Ruth Maitland.) In these extremities the lion must seek the aid of the mouse. And to see Mr Drayton wheedle Mr Hare provides the richest fun, for though the method is one of blandishment there is that in the swelling veins of the Draytonian neck which suggests that dire and unmentionable things wait upon refusal. What was it that Mr Wells's bully at the Potwell Inn threatened to do to Mr Polly? Something about "cutting bits off you" and "kicking you ugly, see"? We see, and Mr Hare apprehends. And what must Mr Hare do to avoid this fate? No more than pretend to make love to the Draytonian spouse. But decency says no. Rather let them dissolve partnership, if that's the word.

THE NATURE OF FARCE

"Let us," he says in effect, "shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows." But the unpoetic Alfred appears not to recognize his Michael, and repeats his mute threat of kicking his friend ugly. So the other weakly consents, and Spouse is no sooner woo'd than won.

Wherefore Drayton, you suppose, emerges triumphant. You suppose wrongly. Even farce has its ethics, and the wrong-doer must be punished. To this end Spouse reneges and decides, in the words of another man-milliner, to be once more Drayton's "popolorum tibby," and henceforth to coil her fascination round him "like a pure and angelic rattlesnake." And the Draytonian mask tells you that if masks could speak his is saying, "Demnition! I would rather be a demd, damp, moist, unpleasant body!" Mr Hare's virtue goes unrewarded, alas! And yet not alas, since he has shown less than complete steadfastness. The piece is grandly played with the high seriousness its kind demands, neither actor betraying consciousness that his antics are exorbitant.

February 25, 1945

Pierrot and Faun

THE SIMPLETON OF THE UNEXPECTED ISLES. By Bernard Shaw
Arts

He wishes me most particular to write *what larks*.
Great Expectations

SOME forty years ago Walkley, apostrophizing Mr Shaw, called him "Incorrigible Pierrot, unregenerate Faun!" The new play had been "stimulating and diverting, occasionally distressing, now and then bewildering." That which was written of *The Doctor's Dilemma* could equally be written of this fantasy. With this qualification—that Mr Shaw's interest in the writing of plays as plays has steadily decreased. Time was when he and stage were well acquainted, though never walking hand in hand like the simple lovers in the song. For Mr Shaw was too incurably an improver of occasions. Perhaps a better simile would be the Walrus and the Carpenter—"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk." Only it would be a very little walk and a great deal of talk, and like those early plays, pleasant and unpleasant.

But enough of babble, as Lady Jane remarked. One is worried. One is worried because one suspects Mr Shaw of not being averse to intellectual sleight-of-hand when he thinks he has a chance of bringing the trick off. In the usual preface he talks of "Overwhelming evidence that vaccination has killed thousands of children in a quite horrible way." Now I have made inquiries of the Health Department concerned, and am informed that in the Borough of Holborn, where I live, *no case of a child dying of vaccination has been known during the last forty years*. Now when a man, lecturing on bridge, tells me that it is Dummy who plays the hand, I obviously do not take for granted anything he may tell me about, say, leads. Wherefore let all Mr Shaw's premises and conclusions be subject to scrutiny.

"Let life come to you." But what sort of life? Certainly not enjoyment of the senses. Nor must Man look forward to a spiritual

binge, since "you can bear hardship much longer than you could bear heaven." To what, then, may he look forward? Apparently to our old friend the Life Force, who, it is assumed, is on the lookout for the New since the attainment of the Old is ultimate satiety and doom. But while unsure of the end, Mr Shaw is cocksure about the means. All men, comes the old parrot-cry, are equal. "Livingstone risked his life in Africa every day to save a black man's soul. Livingstone did not say to the sun-coloured tribesman 'There is between me and thee a gulf that nothing can fill': he proposed to fill it by instructing the tribesman on the assumption that the tribesman was as capable mentally as himself, but ignorant." Consider Mr Shaw's Wilks. "What am I? An empire builder: that's what I am by nature. Cecil Rhodes: that's me. Why am I a clerk with only two shirts to my back? Because life never came to me like it came to Rhodes." Not for Wilks the smallest flick of irony; no suggestion that life did not come to Rhodes but that Rhodes went to life. The message of this play is: Give everybody an equal chance, insist that every man shall be a creator of social values, eliminate the parasitical consumer and destroyer of those values, and there's your Heaven.

In the last act Mr Shaw repeats his old trick of quitting fooling and speaking with the voice of a Major Prophet. Phantasms must go. There shall be no more love, in the romantic sense. No more heroism, meaning braggadocio. No more pride. No more Empire, since a Commonwealth of Nations is nobler. And here the Simpleton speaks, "I am glad I am an English clergyman. A village and a cottage: a garden and a church: these things will not turn to nothing." The reference is to the four phantasms named above, and which the clergyman in his simplicity has treasured. These, says Mr Shaw, "embody all the artistic, romantic and military ideals of our cultured suburbs. On the Day of Judgment not merely do they cease to exist like the useless and predatory people: it becomes apparent that they never did exist. And, enchanting as they may be to our perfumers, who give us the concentrated odour of the flower without the roots or the clay or even the leaves, let us hope they never will."

The end of the play (wittily presented and acted at the Arts

Theatre) shows Prola the priestess left talking to Pra, the priest. She will never desert him. "I, Prola, shall live and grow because surprise and wonder are the very breath of my being, and routine is death to me. Let every day be a day of wonder." In other words the Shavian Mrs Micawber founds her faith in the future on the belief that something will turn up. Do I hold the echo to be intentional? Yes. For the mingle of spiritual and grotesque is wholly characteristic of our great seer. Not without reason do we carve for him "O Pierrot! O Faun!"

March 11, 1945

Why not a Pre-view?

GREAT DAY. By Lesley Storm
Playhouse

IF it is difficult for the dramatic critic to put himself in the place of the ordinary playgoer, it is impossible for the O.P. to put himself in the place of the D.C. Presumably the O.P. spends the hours before going to the theatre in the state in which Cressid plunged Troilus. Expectation whirls him round. Whereas to the D.C. the notions of première and treadmill are inseparable. And here I have an idea. This is that the theatres should take a leaf out of the cinema's book and give the critics a pre-view of all plays. With this difference, that at the pre-view of, say, a light comedy, *only that part would be shown in which it differs from all other light comedies.*

In the course of some thirty years of professional playgoing I must have seen a minimum of five thousand alleged new plays—the number is probably much higher—of which a good half have been light comedies. This means that I have watched two thousand five hundred pairs of lovers bounce about with tennis racquets in the first act, quarrel in the second act, and make it up, in pre-war days, somewhere between ten-thirty and eleven o'clock. Wherefore my pre-view system would eliminate all young men in tennis trousers and all misses in their teens, while heavy fathers would spare us their avoirdupois, and cross-grained old ladies with ebony walking-sticks and hearts of gold would also vanish. Ditto comic charwomen and all landladies and butlers. Critics would be supplied with a synopsis giving the plot, the cast, and the *actual running time in the theatre.* Each critic would also be handed with the synopsis specimens of the wit and a slip of paper, this being the management's tip as to what is deemed new. For example:

GREAT DAY

The interest begins exactly one hour after the rise of the curtain. Atmosphere English village *à la Mrs Miniver.*

NOVELTY PLOT. Inspection by Great Lady of an English village in war-time. Twenty years before play opens Major comes out of army. Vain, idle, shiftless. Marries decent girl, takes to drink, and has sunk to pilfering ten-shilling notes from A.T.S.'s handbags. Nabbed by police, commits suicide.

NOVELTY SUB-PLOT. Daughter of above is now a land-girl about to marry an elderly man. Why? Because he is rich and doesn't drink. Ultimately throws over elderly fiancé in favour of Air Force sergeant bouncing about with wireless.

NOVELTY RUNNING TIME. Twenty minutes.

In gratitude for not being bored the critics would write ecstatic notices. The earnest sort would establish the resemblance of Major and Mrs Ellis to Captain and Mrs Alving, and discuss whether Mrs Ellis stuck to her husband because she still loved him, or out of deference to respectability, or through limpness. Exposition à la William Archer. Whereas the modern Walkley, if such can be conceived, would draw a parallel between the Major and Micawber as he really is when not irradiated by the Dickensian sun. "Surely it was Mrs Micawber's duty to desert this Mr Micawber?"

May I draw yet another comparison suggested by the third act news that the Major's hat has been found floating in the river? My impression is that this kind of Major doesn't commit suicide, that he deserts his wife after getting as much money out of her as he can, afterwards pestering her as her scapegrace husband pestered Betsey Trotwood. That the end of the wretched wife's "grumpy, frumpy story" must always be the end that Dickens knew—the death in hospital of the plausible, worthless fellow whining at the end for forgiveness. But suicide, never! This part of Miss Lesley Storm's story seems to me to be brilliantly told even if I can't quite believe it; it is extremely well acted by Mr Edgar Norfolk and Miss Mary Hinton.

One would possibly be less didactic about the daughter. But I suggest that a land-girl with guts enough to handle a tractor is not going to be so frightened of life that to escape from it she will marry a teetotal, non-smoking, and probably vegetarian bank-balance, old enough to be her father. (Why don't we see him?)

WHY NOT A PRE-VIEW?

Nor do I think much of this play's melting conclusion. The young airman should draw off his shoe and apply it to the seat of the land-girl's sensibility, saying after the fourth wallop, "*Now* will you marry me?" This would make the pre-view's novelty running time twenty-two minutes in all. However, Mr George Selway and Miss Barbara White do at least as well as the two-thousand-five-hundred other pairs of lovers I have seen take three hours to make up their minds. There is some capital acting by Mesdames Avice Landone, Dorothy Dewhurst, Irene Handl, Winifred Evans, Olga Lindo, May Hallatt, and Elsie Randolph. The play has a great deal of easy humour and one superb stroke of real wit which falls to lucky Miss Joan Schofield as the radio-minded ninny who marries a lover of classical music—"He's keen on the Albert Hall and makes me sit for hours listening to Malcolm Sargent and his band."

March 18, 1945

A Noble Play

THE WIND OF HEAVEN. By Emlyn Williams
St James's

THE SHOP AT SLY CORNER. By Edward Percy
St Martin's

FOR unto it, a Welsh farming community at the time of the Crimean War, a child is born. Or has been born some fourteen years before the play opens. A scrubby little boy, like any other village lad, but with a bent for wood-chopping. Of his father we hear little or nothing; his mother is a servant in the house of a war widow, who receives a visit from a vulgar circus-proprietor wanting to hire a field for his show. Now this enterprising fellow, Ellis, gets to hear of the boy's curious knack of conjuring music from the air, obvious grist to his mill.

But not so fast, Mr Circus Proprietor! What is this rambling, wambling stuff put forth by a gnarled gaffer, a shepherd of sorts looking like one of God's spies and taking upon himself the mystery of a Second Coming? The tidings are not yet, but they will be soon. And now they are here. For the Crimean sickness strikes the village hospital, and one of the soldiers has died, his cholera-stricken face "melting into the pillow," and the boy laves that face with water, and the man is restored, and a great wind fills the room without stirring the curtains, and music is heard. So far Mr Emlyn Williams has done admirably. But how to end that which has been so well begun? The boy dies after converting Ellis whom the author now models on the apostle Peter, and it is this modelling which fills the rest of our evening. The man's soul becomes a battleground for belief and unbelief, faith and denial, spiritual adventure and worldly caution. In the end he is allowed to see something which has not always been perceived—that religion is not a commodity to be exploited. In the bluntest possible words, religion is not a circus turn. It is unthinkable that the piece could be better cast or acted. The juxtaposition of Diana Wynyard

as the mistress and Megs Jenkins as the servant is a miracle, and I am willing that it should be an intentional one. This Mother is pure homespun, and since radiance is not a quality of wool however fine the fleece, it is given to Wynyard to interpret Annunciation in terms of Raphael-like contour and expression. As the travelling showman the author himself perfectly suggests the man in spiritual travail—a beautifully thought-out piece of acting. Add a soul-shaking performance by Herbert Lomas as the shepherd, a mixture of Isaiah and any inarticulate, fervent, good old man. Let our young playgoers bend their attention on every movement and every accent of this superb performance. Let them realize that here is great acting. I say in sober earnest that here is something no other actor known to me could achieve. It is as though Lear had convoked his knights to prayer.

"I am very *anxieuse*," says the old Frenchwoman in Mr Edward Percy's thriller *The Shop at Sly Corner*. Which only goes to show how little playwright, player, and producer are at home with the English-speaking habits of French old women. This is just not French. The old girl either sticks to her acquired English and says, "I am very anxious," or she reverts to her native "*Je suis très inquiète*." A trifling matter? Yes, but trifles in this kind make all the difference between conviction and the lack of it. Perhaps conviction wouldn't have accrued anyhow. It is too late in the day to believe in antique dealers who are actually 'fences' melting down the stolen stuff behind trick mantelpieces. And then hadn't one thought that blowpipes and poisoned darts had gone out with the earlier stories of Conan Doyle? Possibly it was a mistake to make the fence a Frenchman. Mr Keneth Kent had too obviously studied French acting, and the result was a performance a trifle too rich and too exuberant; one saw the *actor* at work. How clever of him to tear the detective's card into little pieces, betraying, despite the calm exterior, that inwardly the old man, like his sister, was *anxieux*! But how little we believed in the character!

Were we quite convinced by Mr John Carol's blackmailing little rat? Well, I suppose a South London shop-boy earning twenty-five shillings a week could, given five thousand pounds and a knowledge of gangster films, in five months turn himself into a credible

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imitation of a George Raft or Alan Ladd playboy. But Mr Carol did very well. The real mischief with this play goes much further back than how credibly or incredibly it is acted. Antique shops furnished in this luxurious kind are just not found in South London. Their equivalent is the junk shop, where tattered copies of *Robert Elsmere* and *Donovan* lie cheek by jowl with pairs of old trousers.

April 15, 1945

Words, Words, Words

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI. By John Webster
Haymarket

I can see no magnificent meanin' jumping out of that!

SEAN O'CASEY, *The Silver Tassie*

SITTING at film of which could make nothing. Who stole jade necklace? Why did police third-degree detective? What was Gorilla Man's function? Mum's the word. Exciting? Yes. Vivid? Yes. Understandable? No. Brilliant colleague conceded picture "bewildering to anyone who frets about a logical sequence of events in a murder film." But sequence of events in tragedy must be logical. Melodrama else. Have idea this film is pure Webster. Run through play's plot. Duchess is widow proposing to make second marriage; is, in fact, married to Steward, Antonio; about to bear him child; is spied on by brothers, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, and Cardinal, employing as agent one-time malefactor Bosola. B. subjects Duchess to mental tortures of fiendish ingenuity. Strangles her. Ferdinand, mad, slain by Bosola. B. accidentally killed in a scuffle after fatally wounding Cardinal. Antonio? Windpipe slit by B. ten minutes earlier. End of shorthand.

Mr Gielgud, playing the periwig-pated Ferdinand, tears the fellow's passion to tatters as though on Leontes' rage he were piling Othello's frenzy. But surely we should find some tremendous meaning jumping out of all this fuming and fretting? What is that meaning? We are told that Ferdinand is "of a most perverse and turbulent nature," that when he laughs it is merely "to laugh all honesty out of fashion." Why, then, should such a one threaten to kill his sister if she but thinks of a second marriage? Misalliance cannot enter into it, because Ferdinand has not thought of Antonio in this connexion. Tucked away at the end is something about being balked of a fortune if the Duchess remarries—an excuse even less credible than Iago's perfunctory pretext for hating the Moor. No. Ferdinand is drawn throughout, as Hazlitt declared

Iago to have been drawn, as "a man of diseased intellectual activity," an "amateur of tragedy in real life," one who "stabs men in the dark to prevent *ennui*." Why, then, his crazy insistence on self-denial in another? Can Webster have been writing a Freudian tragedy of sister-fixation three hundred years before his time? And then take Bosola. What are we to make of this moralist *à rebours*? What should we make of a pirate who, forcing some wretch to walk the plank, first regaled him with a sermon on the brevity of human existence?

I suggest that the notion that a stage character must be one hundred per cent. consistent with itself is a modern one. That Shakespeare recognized consistency as a general principle and stuck to it when convenient. That Webster just didn't bother about it. That the Jacobean playgoer, like the modern filmgoer, asked only to have his attention violently aroused and excitingly held, and was not in the least disturbed at finding the chief villain touching off Morality's Roman candles. If to-day we still find Webster's play worth-while it is not because of the inexplicable plot, the dumb shows, and the masques of madmen, but because of the sheer splendour of the verbal fireworks. Would it pleasure the Duchess to have her throat cut with diamonds, be smothered with cassia, or shot to death with pearls? The modern filmgoer needs use no more than his eyes; Webster's playgoer had need of both eyes and ears.

Mr Gielgud put up a terrific performance in the first half, reminding one of the virtuoso pianist who pretends that Liszt's E flat Concerto is another *Emperor*. If in the second part he dwindled it was for the reason that Burbage plus Betterton plus Kean could not have done more with this mish-mash of Hamlet's "antic disposition," Edgar's "Poor Tom's a-cold," and a subtle prevision, which I take to be Mr Gielgud's own, of Pirandello's Henry IV. Mr Trouncer's Bosola was a grand exhibition. I am not persuaded that the actor knew quite what to do with this mixture of Enobarbus and Thersites; to watch him do it was nevertheless a rich experience. Miss Ashcroft's Duchess? Walkley once divided leading ladies into "mousey-pouseys" and "roguey-pogueys." With this example before me, I venture to coin "teeny-weenies" as a designation for

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

exquisite, sensitive, delicate actresses whom Nature has not cast in the tragic mould. The Duchess is a part for Titan, not for Titania. I say, with respect, that in the rôle of Webster's Duchess nothing but the grand manner will do. A contemporary critic wrote of Mrs Siddons in Franklin's tragedy *The Earl of Warwick* that she made her entry through a large archway, "which she really seemed to fill." Any actress who is to present Webster's heroine must fill, and fill completely, the archway of the spectator's mind. And to do this she must be vocally adequate. Something more than plaintiveness, however touching, is wanted if "I am Duchess of Malfi still!" is not to sound like "I am still Little Miss Muffet!"

April 22, 1945

Ay, There's the Rub

PERCHANCE TO DREAM. A Musical Play by Ivor Novello
Hippodrome

ALL of us who frequent music halls must have had the following experience. A conjuror hands us one of those steel rings some eighteen inches in diameter and tells us to examine it. Next he hands us its fellow, and we assure him that in our opinion both rings are sound, whole, and unsunderable, barren of trick or device. In other words, that they are honest rings. Whereupon the conjuror, smiling, passes one ring through the other and hands the pair back to us, and we tug and tug, and behold, we find that they will not come apart.

Some years ago I was entertained at supper by a famous magician whose verbal fencing was almost as adroit as his conjuring. But not quite. I deemed it probable that my host, being the nephew of one of France's greatest writers, might be taken in literary ambush. *And he was!* From praise of Uncle Théophile to literary and dramatic criticism was only a step. From this to Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* was but another step. After which the transition to this writer's *Nathan der Weise* was easy, and easier still the switch from the parable of the three rings to the conjuror's two. At this point my host said, "My dear friend, ever since the consommé you have been pumping me. My Order prevents me from giving away any of our secrets, and this naturally includes the ring trick. I can, however, tell you that this is the most childishly simple thing in the conjuror's bag, and the one that you have the least chance of detecting. In fact, you have no chance. And I am giving nothing away." I said, "On the contrary, Mr Magician, you have given everything away. When you say 'no chance' I take you at your word, and I argue like this. A man in search of treasure buried south of the Equator has some chance, even if it's only one in a million, as long as his search is southerly. Only when his search is northerly has he *no* chance. If I were on the right track

I must have a chance according to the measure of my perspicacity. But you say NO chance. Therefore my approach must be wrong. I have been looking to find how the conjuror does something that can't possibly happen. Now if a thing can't happen it doesn't, and no conjuror can make it happen. All he can do is to substitute something else and get me to accept the substitute. Whence I deduce that the conjuror does not pass one ring through another, and that what I think I see I am not in fact seeing. Sleight of mind, not sleight of hand." The magician said, "Your cigar has gone out—let me give you another." And produced one from behind my ear.

Perchance I dreamed at the first night of Mr Ivor Novello's new Hippodrome show. Anyhow, the following is what the lighter stage's most popular magician induced me to believe that I saw. A Regency buck (Mr Novello), who is also a highwayman. A cad who will wager £5000 that he will seduce an unknown cousin within twenty-four hours of her stay under his roof, doubled with a verray parfit gentil knight prepared to lay wager and a hundred-thousand-pound pearl necklace at the feet of Purity Unsullied (Miss Roma Beaumont). A cut-purse who dies babbling of re-incarnation. Did I spend the rest of Dream-Time watching what gross and vulgar spirits would call subsequent developments? Yes. Was Time punctuated by aeons of Ballet? Yes. Was there a very, very great deal of lush, romantic music, scored principally for harp after the manner of that popular composer, Herr Mittel Europa? Yes. Or so these things seemed; I vouch for none of them. Perchance, like the conjuror's rings, something else was happening. Coventry Patmore tells us to look in any work of art for the *punctum indifferens*, or Point of Rest. I found this the other evening in the admirable singing of Miss Olive Gilbert and Miss Rutherford's magnificent determination to stand no nonsense and deliver none.

Is the foregoing a trifle grudging, even bordering on the ungenerous? I think it may be, and I hasten to say that the curtain, when it went up, took with it the entire audience, which remained in its seventh heaven until, after three hours and a half, the curtain descended and automatically brought the audience down with it.

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Mr Novello's nonsense had obviously suited their nonsense. The actor himself? I don't feel that he is at home in the age, or perhaps the country, of Pierce Egan. I feel that his genius requires a steeper setting, a balmier, boshier air, that his spiritual home is the Tyrol. I wonder whether in his next production Mr Novello will wear a feather? I rather think he should.

April 29, 1945

The Theatre in War-time

ANY estimate of the war-time theatre must take into account two factors, one social and the other national. Let us admit that what our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and factory workers have been fighting for is not only this country but everything *in* this country. Which means the theatre, including *their* theatre. Was this theatre to do nothing in return? I hold that part, a large part, of Shaftesbury Avenue's war-time duty was to give the troops what they wanted, and not what highbrows thought it would be nice for them to want.

Let us clear our minds of cant. The majority of this nation has always preferred bad art to good, and it will be a bad day for this country's arms when it doesn't. Say that I have to pick three men for some job requiring courage, grasp of the practicalities, bodily vigour. I have two groups of candidates—Tom, Dick, and Harry make up one virile group; Basil, Alaric, and Cecil compose the languid other. Tom says his favourite story is *Blood on the Goal-post*; Basil votes for *To the Lighthouse*. Dick says his favourite poem is *Christmas Day in the Workhouse*; Alaric insists on *The Wreck of the "Deutschland."* Harry's favourite piece of music is *Pistol-packing Momma*; Cecil plumps for Bartókery of sorts. Do I need to tell you which trio I would choose? Now I have never thought that the boys would have thanked me for sending them to, say, *King Lear*, and whenever my advice has been asked I have invariably recommended a musical comedy. I have believed that our fighting men are entitled to an escapist theatre, and a theatre that is escapist *in their way*.

Now for the national factor. This is the Englishman's refusal to associate entertainment with the functioning of the intellectual machine. Being made to think in a theatre is, to use a favourite phrase of his, "too much like work." Hear Professor Morley:

There must be a deeper earnestness than plays can demand, in whatever serious thing Englishmen are to look at without exercise of that sense of the humorous which is part of their life; so natural

a part that every man is in every grade of society regarded as a bore who lacks it; and the very phrase with thousands even among our educated men for not finding a thing acceptable is "seeing no fun" in it.

This is as old as Shakespeare, and as new as yesterday. What does the reader think was broadcast on that historic Sunday morning, immediately before Mr Chamberlain's Declaration of War? Purcell? Elgar? Vaughan Williams? Was there any attempt at "a Solemn Musick"? There was not. We listened to a selection from *Princess Ida*!

Which of us has not heard some such war-time conversation as this: "My dear, I'm terribly excited about the new revue at the Cocktail. I hear the Ketchups are *too* marvellous! I simply shan't be able to *exist* till the first-night. What's that, my lamb—you're going on Monday to that *Duchess of Malfi* thing? Agatha, angel, you simply *can't*—I hear it's *too* morose!" As in war so in peace. I remember in the piping days a certain musical comedy which was running to packed houses. And then the gas-main in the roadway blew up. Did that affect the takings? There was a short interval when nobody was allowed near because of the escaping fumes. But as soon as a mouse could cross the street without falling dead, the theatre re-opened, and at once elegant ladies with the stoutest of hearts and the thinnest of soles descended from motor-cars a quarter of a mile off and, gingerly escorted by their squires, made their way through a scene of havoc comparable to the trenches of the last war. Some of them left part of their clothing on the barbed wire, and when they got to the theatre showed each other their wounds.

Let me repeat. No Englishman likes to use his brain in the theatre; all foreigners do. No, reader, I am not making a case for other nations' intellectuality as against our British pudding-headedness and phlegm. The point is that our national characteristics are the first thing to be considered in any indictment of the commercial manager. I suggest that in view of these characteristics the commercial theatre has during the past six years acquitted itself beyond any reasonable expectation. Here are a few of the authors whose works have been on view: Shakespeare, Jonson, Webster, Ford,

Congreve, Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Shaw, Wilde, Pinero, Barrie, Bridie, Priestley, Maugham, Coward, Emyln Williams, Ustinov, Ibsen, Tchegov, Turgenev, Molière, Sierra, Jean-Jacques Bernard. And all the best American dramatists. In bludgeon-plain English, the good play has been in evidence for whoever has tried to find the good play. It all goes back to something the Prodigal says in St John Hankin's play, "Does anybody suppose I *want* to spend my life adding up accounts in some filthy Hong Kong bank?" Does anybody suppose the London theatre managers *want* to put on trash? I suggest that they don't. I suggest that if they over-fulfil the obligation to provide trash for the simple it is because those who might be supposed to like the better stuff give no evidence that they do.

May 6, 1945

History sans Peruke

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH. By Thornton Wilder
Phoenix

THE GAY PAVILION. By William Lipscomb
Piccadilly

COLD blood," said Philip Guedalla, "is what one murders one's relations in." The skin of their teeth, says Mr Thornton Wilder, is that by which the Antrobus family has survived ice, flood, pestilence, wars, depressions, and all the natural shocks that flesh is heir to. Studying this play's text one imagines the author's notions concerning it to have run something as follows: Have I anything new to say about life, death, predestination and free-will, evolution and the life-force, romantic passion and family ties? Perhaps not very much. But why not present the old stuff in a new dress? Abolish Time. Pretend the ice-age is coeval with co-eds. Have a mammoth and a dinosaur on the stage together with a telegraph boy. Bring Adam and Eve up to date. Show Cain as Henry Antrobus, a High School boy with football jersey and catapult. Give the old story a modern twist. Henry, with a stone in his hand, can hit anything from a bird to an elder brother. A most unfortunate accident, and quite a job getting the police out of the house. Have this said by the hired help—Helen, Circe, Cleopatra (must be careful about the order) in the guise of Atlantic City trollop. Have the alphabet, simple arithmetic, and the wheel all in the making. Have Homer and Moses (must find out which came first) put in an appearance. Have scenery that moves of its own accord. Peer-Gyntism plus Back-to-Methuselah-ism. Hotch-potch of Pirandello, Obey, Kaiser, O'Neill. Touches of Walt Disney, the Marx Brothers, and Olsen and Johnson. Will this make a good play? It may or it mayn't, but it'll win the Pulitzer. Will the folks walk out? Possibly. But they'll talk, which is better than staying and not talking. Actually this play did win the Pulitzer, and on the first night, according to Mr Burns Mantle, "the sight of bewildered and dis-

couraged patrons walking out at the first intermission and not returning to their seats was not uncommon."

What Mr Wilder is trying to say emerges clearly enough on the stage. Is one, perhaps, a little puzzled by the last-act identification of Cain with the spirit of misrule, turbulence, rebellion, in a word, Youth? Is this an unsentimental re-statement of the Arthurian "lest one good custom"? Is God in Cain too? Whatever the intention the final scene, as played by Mr Cecil Parker and Mr Terry Morgan, was immensely moving. Moving, too, was Miss Joan Young as Mrs Antrobus saying to her husband, "I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. Two imperfect people got married, and it was the promise that made the marriage." Here is the *Ewig Weibliche* with a shade of purposefulness not in the German poet's mind.

The play's comedy, farce, fantasy, what you will, can be summed up in Joe Gargery's "What larks!" On the visual side, owing to Mr Olivier's ingenious, inventive producing backed by some brilliantly co-ordinated team-work, the play must be reckoned a complete success. Through it all, lovely to look at, flitted and fluttered Miss Leigh's hired girl, Sabina, an enchanting piece of nonsense-cum-allure, half dab-chick and half dragon-fly. The best performance in this kind since Yvonne Printemps.

In 1787 Fox in the House denied the report that the Prince had married Mrs Fitzherbert. The next morning the Prince sent for Grey, the Whig politician, afterwards Lord Grey, admitted the marriage and then said to him, "Charles went too far last night. You, my dear Grey, shall explain it." Grey refusing, the Prince said, "Then Sheridan must say something." Miss Dormer Creston in her admirable account of the matter writes, "Sheridan's sinuous mind was capable of any feat, and going down to the House he gave vent, in the words of the Lord Holland of that day, to 'some unintelligible sentimental trash about female delicacy.'" I cannot think of a better description of Mr Lipscomb's cream bun.

Half-way through *The Gay Pavilion* Mr Frederick Valk gave us ten minutes of the old king—a superb piece of acting which blew all the other characters off the stage and left it vacant. But then it

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had been vacant all along, since there was no Prinney and no Sheridan and no Maria for Mr John Byron, Mr Frank Allenby and Miss Mary Ellis to do anything with.

May 20, 1945

Our Debt to France

IN view of the coming visit of the Comédie Française I hope that some reflections on the French theatre will not be deemed out of place. There was a time when the English stage was too much beholden to the French, when nine out of ten new plays were adaptations of something Professor Morley, writing in the 'sixties, called "the *Pomme Pourrie* of MM. Pécché and Bonbon." Then came that famous evening in May 1893, when, at the St James's, with *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, the English theatre began to look up. And if Ibsen was the dramatist looked up to so much the better. After 1918 the English stage was again something in the doldrums. And then into the sky leapt the flame of Sean O'Casey's two great plays, to be quickly followed by the steady blaze of Priestley and Bax, the *ignis fatuus* of Bridie, the Catherine wheels of Emlyn Williams, the rockets of Coward, and the squibs of Rattigan. At the same time a quiet, unsensational light, new to the English theatre, was filtering through from France. A glow, lambent yet melancholy, compounded equally of dawn and dusk. One first became certain of this gentle flooding at the Stage Society's production in 1928 of Jean-Jacques Bernard's *L'Ame en Peine* (*The Unquiet Spirit*). True that one had been faintly aware of it two years earlier in *Le Printemps des Autres* (*The Springtime of Others*). Later one was to see *Martine*, which Mr Sydney Carroll in 1929 courageously sponsored, *Le Feu qui reprend mal* (*The Sulky Fire*) in 1934, *L'Invitation au Voyage* in 1937, and *Madeleine* in 1944. Looking back on all these plays, three of which are little masterpieces, I find that one thing stands out. Just as one remembers certain flamboyant moments of Sarah and one or two of Duse's abnegations and subsidences, so in *The Unquiet Spirit* one will ever recall the way that brilliant and regretted actress Clare Eames avoided contact with the stranger to whom she was for ever after to be in thrall.

In 1931 came the visit of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier,

playing in its own language. Obey's *Noé* won us all over at once. Fewer people saw *Le Viol de Lucrèce*. But those few who did will never forget that chamber, empty except for the bed round which the curtains were drawn. The Reciter and Recitress had mounted pulpits on each side of the stage. Now came Tarquin, stealing along black corridors and fumbling at dark doors, tearing his breast. He entered the chamber and drew aside the curtains of the bed. The thing which should restrain him now was his kingship, voiced by the Reciter crying four times, "Tarquin-roi! Roi des Romains! Roi! Roi!" But in vain. In the last act the Reciter put the whole thing back in time. "La grande Rome est en histoire. Athènes, jadis, à ses grandes heures, fut en beauté; Babylone, en amour; Troie, en alarmes. Un jour, Berlin sera en guerre et Paris, en révolution. Rome, aujourd'hui, est en histoire." Yes, that was great playgoing.

And surely that was a superb moment in *Bataille de la Marne*, when the soldiers who should defend Paris retreated and again retreated. Always they had withdrawn towards the footlights, and now, in the theatre, could go no farther. "*En avant!*" cried France, and the spectacular right-about-turn was the image which told us that the Battle of the Marne had begun. The victorious generals were saluted by name. Manoury! French! Foch! Sarraill! Castelnau! Joffre! One name was singled out for its beauty of sound. "Général Franchet d'Espérey! Vous dont le nom est beau comme une devise!" And the good British playgoer, given a schoolboy's knowledge of French, recognized in this apostrophe, unthinkable in any language other than Latin, the *panache* which is France.

In the way of acting one still looks back gratefully to the visit paid to us by the Comédie in March 1939. Never again can I hope to see such a piece of comic playing as that of Fernand Ledoux as the old crock in *Le Légataire Universel*. What crackle and atmospherics emerged from that bosom when bronchial disturbance permitted anything to emerge at all! Did ever legs so vacillate? And then there was another actor, Pierre Dux, who contrived to run the entire gamut of the *cocasse* without respect to clime or time, the equivalent of the English bridge which binds Jonson's

scamps to Sid Field's scallywags. The very pores of these French players seemed to act.

To the later French theatre we have been indebted for Mauriac's *Asmodée* (*The Intruder*), Cocteau's *Les Parents Terribles*, and Giraudoux's *Amphitryon* 38. Nor can I forget Sacha Guitry's delicious *Mozart* and *Mariette*. In the second play I can still see that half-bovine, half-imperial Napoleon III sitting in his box putting his heavily kid-gloved hands portentously together, and still hear that half-whisper, "Il faut tâcher de ne pas être ridicule!" In the earlier play I have not forgotten, though it is twenty years ago, how people were seen to cry, and by "cry" I mean shed tears, when Music's heavenly child appeared at the top of the gilt staircase and descended it to kneel at the feet of Mme d'Épinay. These things will be in our minds when our visitors raise their curtain.

May 22, 1945

A Question of Idiom

JACOBOWSKY AND THE COLONEL. By Franz Werfel. Adapted
by S. N. Behrman
Piccadilly

OH, dear Mercy o' Heaven!" wailed the Lady Mabilie in Mr Jeffery Farnol's romance. "Ah! . . . is he . . . hast thou . . .?" "Oh, but perfectly, *chère Madame*," answered the Vidame, wiping his blade on Lord Brandon's motionless person. "*Hélas!* it was necessary that I keel the so passionate gentleman." "*Hélas!*" says Colonel Tadeusz Boleslav Stjerbinsky, the hero of Mr Werfel's comedy. "It is necessary that I keel the so interfering Jacobowsky." Why? Because the little Polish Jew has overdone ingratiation in the matter of Marianne, the Polish Colonel's French fiancée.

But let me begin at the beginning. This play at its start had a fine air of novelty. And then it began to appear that a good deal of Mr Werfel's matter, and even manner, had been dreamed of by other dramatic philosophers. Let me say and be done with it that in the matter of the play's theme, the deflation of grandiosity by gumption, the likeness to Mr Shaw's *Arms and the Man* popped up once every five minutes. And what of the other four? Well, there was M. Obey. These stragglers leaving Paris with music heard in the air and Mr Esmé Percy in a mood of soliloquy turning him into a Reciter—what were they but the very mood and mechanics of *Bataille de la Marne*? The plot—the outwitting of the Nazis by three simpletons and a girl—could be paralleled in any one of twenty films made since the war.

I am inclined to think there is a playwriting mind like that of certain composers. Listening to Mahler an amateur like myself has no trouble in recognizing not only subconscious echoes of Schubert, Wagner, Strauss, Brückner, and even Beethoven, but moods and colourings which one thinks would not have occurred to Mahler but for Schubert and the rest. Mr Werfel's work is full of such echoes, moods, colourings. There was a moment when it

looked as though Marianne would have to choose between the Colonel, who could offer her nothing but his histrionics, and Jacobowsky, whose one card was his humility and heart's need. Would Marianne take a leaf out of *Candida's* book and say, "That's a good bid, S. L. Jacobowsky"? And when the Gestapo man in his death agony clawed at the mechanical piano and set it going what filmgoer in the audience could not but bethink him of the similar incident in *Pépé le Moko*? The truth, I suppose, is that these things are in the air. Put it this way. If in a modern novel I read of an elderly gentleman with twinkling spectacles who undertakes scientific rambles in the company of three friends and a comic servant, and later sacrifices his life in the French Revolution to save the husband of the girl he is in love with, I should assume, not that the author had read *Pickwick* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, but that he hadn't. And on the ground that it is easier to believe in coincidence than in filchings which must be detected instantly. Therefore I give it as my opinion that Mr Werfel has never seen M. Obey's play, or those two plays by Mr Shaw, or any of those twenty films. And certainly not *The Lisbon Story*, which is the musical-comedy form of the idiom one holds to be anybody's property.

Montague once said that the highest courtesy in an author is to treat his reader "as no blind horse but a man who has some wit of his own and can take a thing in." The present authors—the play has been adapted by Mr S. N. Behrman—treat their audience as if they were inmates of a blind asylum. And what is their point? Simply that a humble little Jew full of shrewdness and resource is of more value to society than some noisy descendant of Ancient Pistol. Well, it doesn't need two playwrights from the New World to invite the post-Shavians of the Old to remark this, let alone make a note of it twenty times.

And then in my view the comedy was tragically miscast. The Colonel is a monument of humourlessness, which means that if he is to amuse he must be played by an actor bubbling over with an inner sense of the ludicrous. An Alfred Lunt, for example. I have no doubt that Mr Redgrave tried to be funny the other evening; indeed, one could see him trying. But seriousness deeper than

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anything even Matthew Arnold conceived, and not funning, is this good actor's forte; he dissects absurdity where he should warm to it. The Colonel is what a schoolboy would call a gorgeous ass; he was turned into a solemn and regrettable one, sending cold shivers down my back as though Mr Dombey had cast himself for Cyrano. The point about Jacobowsky is subservience backed by guile, and we were given that delightful player, Mr Karel Stepanek, radiating distinction and charm. The result was like a Jewish Traddles enacted by Steerforth at his most dazzling. Add that Miss Rachel Kempson as Marianne drenched the south-west corner of France with the authentic perfume of Wimbledon. On the other side of the account there was a delicious piece of comic acting by Mr Joseph Almas, the scenery was imaginative, and the music charming. And the attempt to present something out of the rut was praiseworthy. But why not a play which is new as well as novel?

June 10, 1945

In Nathan's Wake

CHICKEN EVERY SUNDAY. By Julius J. and Philip G. Epstein
Savoy

SWEET YESTERDAY. A Musical Play by Philip Leaver. Music
by Kenneth Leslie-Smith
Adelphi

WHO first started the notion of writing a play around unrelated groups of persons living in the same place, say a block of flats? The idea is simplicity itself. You take a railway train whose engine suddenly emits a loud shriek, causing the occupants of six compartments to thrust out of window six heads which the oncoming tunnel neatly severs. After which the dramatist proves that these six heads were distressingly, conveniently, justly, inexorably, gratuitously, ironically removed. And, in the language of lady-novelists, "out of the warp and woof of six divergent tragedies a texture of common significance is evolved." George Jean Nathan wrote of the New York production of *Chicken Every Sunday*:

In this kind of drama the nature of the setting makes it possible to introduce a quota of varied types and characters without the usual dramaturgical difficulties. With a boarding-house, the necessity for rational and ingenious explanations for such introductions disappears; the playwright can bring on, without apology, any shape or form of human flesh, however anomalous and grotesque.

Well, who are the people gathered under Mrs Blachman's hospitable roof? There is the husband, president of a bank, a line of street-cars, and a laundry, all of which are losing money; three children; an idiot boy-poet and his imbecile mother; an Irishman who has strayed in from the Abbey Theatre; a drunken female vaudeville artist with a passion for yodelling; a woman who imagines herself pursued by Indians; a coloured maid; a fantastic creature who is a combination of Mrs Skewton and Miss Flite; a big-business man

with a wife who thinks she is Mae West; a clergyman; a socially conscious young man from Boston; a poultry-farmer, and the aforesaid Red Indian. As Nathan put it, "only Leopold and Loeb are missing."

My old friend gave the key to the play's success in America when he said that "the piled-up indelicacies are so funny and so forthright and unmincing that they are irresistible." Well, I found them easy to resist, and can only think, since my mind is at least as robust as my colleague's, that the jokes have been watered. Or is it that like some light wines some American farces will not travel? Not all farces, and certainly not sustained practical jokes like *Room Service* and *My Sister Eileen*, where there was action. In the present piece there is only oddity, the farce comes to us without its American players, and the cast is inescapably British. Rickmansworth and not Arizona is written all over it, and the English countryside is not *droll*.

Readers, I suppose, will be furious if I mention Offenbach, Strauss, and Sullivan, or even Planquette, Messenger, and German in connexion with the modern musical play. But why not? Since the new is always better than the old, what are our champions of modernity afraid of? I will tell them. One would recognize, say, *Three Little Maids from School* as Sullivan if one heard it thrummed on bazookas in the Fiji Islands. But would one recognize as indubitable Leslie-Smith any extract from the Adelphi score if one heard it poured out by, say, Frankie Schubert's Otiose Otaheitans in some Tyneside palais de danse? I doubt it. I suggest one would attribute it to that school of composers who, between the two wars, supplied the pseudo-Viennese drama with its sound equivalent. And say that Mr Leslie-Smith does the job better than it has ever been done before. The programme attributes the orchestration to Mr Ben Frankel, who has seen to it that it is lush to saturation point. What harps and timbrels! What wild ecstasy! And for the jaded critic, what struggles to escape! Is it naughty to ask who did the orchestration for Offenbach and those others?

The non-musical element in *Sweet Yesterday*? Come, come! The essence of grand opérette is to fill a void with teeming nonsense. Mr Webster Booth and Miss Anne Ziegler sing delightfully,

and very, very often. Mr Reginald Tate exudes nobility. Mr Hugh Miller has not forgotten what, according to the Baroness Orczy, French policemen are like. (The period is 1805.) And Miss Dora Hare confidently presents a Madame Sans-Gêne born within sound of Bow Bells. Which tempts me to suggest deletion of the line "Does France move against England?" The answer could only be "If it does, it will be civil war." No. Let these Mossoos and Madarms toast each other at the boofy at Booloyne without insisting on their nationality.

June 24, 1945

“Speak, Hands, for Me!”

DUET FOR TWO HANDS. By Mary Hayley Bell

Lyric

THE first duty of the good playgoer is to accept his playwright's initial postulate. No sensible person boggles at the Ghost in *Hamlet*, Bottom's translation into an ass, or the pretence that a young woman has only to don doublet and hose to become unrecognizable to her lover. Every playgoer who read his morning paper on Thursday last knew that the previous night's play had been about a poet who, having lost his hands in an accident, allowed a surgeon to fit him with a new pair. Is a grafting operation of this kind possible? No, of course not. The informed playgoer knew what he was in for. The uninformed, in other words, the first-nighter? If he was a good playgoer he raised his eyebrows once, dropped them again, and settled in his seat to await developments.

It is natural that anybody fitted with hands which have belonged to some one else should be interested in learning how those hands behaved before they were his. The sensible thing—but which of us has his nerves in complete control?—would be to make no inquiries. Imagine any pacifist's horror on discovering he is brandishing a pair of bruiser's mitts! Or Hamlet's on knowing his fingers have paddled in unlawful necks and pinched wanton on cheeks they should not. Or Micawber's on realizing his knuckles are those he has rapped, the knuckles of Heep, the Forger and the Cheat! But this is Wonderland, you say. Yes, and the reverse of Alice's. That young lady addressed a letter to “*Alice's Right Foot, Esq., Hearthrug, near the Fender.*” In Miss Bell's case it is right and left hand which send messages to Stephen Cass's brain. They make him aware of things he has not known. They vamp up a Chinese boat-song which their former owner had heard in China. (Odd that Chinese coolies should trim their junk to a sentimental tune which could go into any one of London's musical plays!) Hereabouts it begins to dawn upon Cass that the cramped, crook'd

sensation in his fingers has to do with strangling, and the first part of the play ends with the intimation that the previous owner of the hands was a murderer.

In the second part it is clear that what our playwright is after is not the thriller but the essay in morbid psychology. This brings us to the surgeon who knows the murderer's identity, and also to the point where the play goes to pieces. It seems that Edward Sarclet, the inventor of the new operation, lives in the Orkney Islands! (Time and to spare to think out new stunts between setting legs broken through stumbling over Saturday night's lobster-pots!) It now appears that some years previously the surgeon's daughter Abigail, a mixture of Barrie's Mary Rose and Ibsen's Hilda Wangel, fell in love with a professional rake who, later, got another girl into trouble, murdered her and was hanged. But stay. The murderer was not the rake but the surgeon, who, as Kipling says, had taken his fun where he found it, and then arranged for the poisoning to look like the rake's work.

And now, perhaps, one has some justification for asking why the improbabilities should be so thick. Why, since Cass is Sarclet's best friend, does Sarclet choose this particular murderer's hands? Why does he bring Cass all the way to the Orkneys to display those dreadful digits in front of his daughter who will certainly recognize them? To ask these things is like asking why Sophocles first warns Oedipus that he is going to slay his father and marry his mother and then makes him kill a man old enough to be his father and marry a woman old enough to be his mother. The answer is that the old dramatist got away with his nonsense, and the new one nearly gets away with hers. But then Miss Bell has been very clever. She has set her scene in the misty, sea-bound north, with a strong tidal connexion between her shores and Ibsen's—a connexion reinforced by the presence of Herda Sarclet, the surgeon's elderly sister, and obviously one of the Ella Renthheim breed. In the end Cass discovers that his fingers close and unclosé, not out of a natural bent for throttling but because their former owner wants justice done on his murderer. Sarclet conveniently succumbing to a heart attack, Cass utters an abbreviated version of "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!" and goes out to look for Abigail.

The play is what admirers of the novels of Mrs Humphry Ward used to call "deep." And I suggest that it is deep only because the author has willed it so; I have the notion that deepness, and a lot of it, was required to prevent the audience from realizing the silliness of what it was asked to grant at the beginning. But the fact that a play is nonsense does not prevent it from being good theatre any more than the fact that a play is sense makes it theatre. There are two first-rate parts for Cass and Sarclet, and they are played by Mr John Mills and Mr Elwyn Brook-Jones with any amount of nervous tension. Miss Mary Morris, who is Abigail, has a striking personality and considerable means of expression, including a certain amount of power; it is greatly to the credit of her dramatic sense and tact that she puts into the part all that it will hold and no more. As Ella Rentheim-Sarclet Miss Elspeth March's brooding and boding are of immense value. The audience liked it all. Which may be what matters.

July 1, 1945

La Comédie Française

New Theatre

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| L'IMPROMPTU DE VERSAILLES..... | Molière |
| LE BARBIER DE SEVILLE..... | Beaumarchais |
| RUY BLAS..... | Victor Hugo |
| TARTUFFE..... | Molière |

OUR distinguished visitors began with the little piece in which Molière replied to an attack made upon him by the Comedians of the Hotel de Bourgogne. This tiniest of extravaganzas requires a large cast, and as the actors tossed the ball one to another our slower-moving wits had time to realize four things. The essence of French acting is pace. The mark of French enunciation is clarity. Of gesture, elegance. Of miming, appositeness. This last was not always true, even in France; witness this playlet's rebuke to a bad actress: "Voyez-vous comme cela est naturel et passionné? Admirez ce visage riant qu'elle conserve dans les plus grandes afflictions." Are there perhaps still in England one or two green-rooms where this might be studied with advantage?

Beaumarchais' well-preserved little comedy followed, and perhaps one might ask without too much cynicism to what or to whom should be given the credit for its preservation. To the antiseptic of the author's wit plus his gift of observation? (The young fellow was not born a watchmaker for nothing.) To his famous Leftism, which delayed the production of this comedy and imposed a three years' ban on its equally famous sequel? (Molière, in the little piece which began the evening, was a hundred years before Beaumarchais in his proposal to make his figures of fun out of noblemen instead of the traditional clowning domestics.) How far wrong should we be in giving the credit to that genius who fitted tunes to situations with a felicity that is still the model for the fashioner of comic opera? Perhaps this heart-searching is pedantic. Whoever laughs is disarmed, as another Frenchman said. Between play and players we were left weaponless on Monday evening; the company,

headed by M. Pierre Dux, had given us the whipped cream of French comic acting.

Hugo's *Ruy Blas*? Yes and no. It behoves one to step warily here for fear one should fall into the old error of judging the masterpieces of one nation by the taste of another. We are displeased when a French critic finds Shakespeare barbarous and Ben Jonson uncouth. Whence it follows that an English critic should not be too sure that Hugo's rhetoric is mere bombast. To our friends it may, indeed it must, be something more. Better to ask whether Hugo's drama caught the new spirit stirring in the minds of Frenchmen and, if so, crystallized it in terms of poetry. Not that one would go as far as Swinburne, who held that Hugo, functioning as poet, eclipsed Milton and recalled "the lyric inspiration of Coleridge and Shelley, the prophetic inspiration of Dante and Isaiah, the satiric inspiration of Juvenal and Dryden." After which there was nothing left for the extravagant fellow to say of Hugo as dramatist except that he was the greatest since Shakespeare. Let me say that whereas the witty lines of the previous evening had been so many pennants fluttering gaily in the breeze, Hugo's purple passages were like banners hung on some donjon's walls. And the core of the castle? We English are not so liberal-minded as the French. We hold in our snobbish way that the lackey who aspires to his royal mistress is a lackey still; if we pretend that he isn't, it is only in a semi-serious, Monsieur Beaucaire-ish sort of way. And then, phlegmatists that we are, we have little liking for the hero who is alternately braggart and sob-machine. Not Teresa del Riego herself could have dried those never-ending tears in M. Paul Deiber's voice, though in view of the actor's youth this was a very promising performance. You ask me who is the composer to have kept alive this, to us, stuffed dummy of a play? I answer: Meyerbeer in his mood of Piff-Paffery. And even then I doubt, for Meyerbeer too is dead.

On the occasion of the visit of the Comédie in 1879 Sarcey wrote, "Il était à craindre que le *Misanthrope* n'ennuyât quelque peu son monde. Dame! entre nous, le *Misanthrope*, même à Paris, n'est pas toujours régalant; on l'écoute avec respect, mais sans transport." Sarcey could not have written this about *Tartuffe*, to which one

listened not only with veneration but with delight. This piece lives, not because Molière satirized manners, which are the human animal's clothes, but the animal itself. It is a moot point whether the immortal hypocrite should be played on Shakespearean (Angelo) or Dickensian lines. I suggest that the character has that universality which permits it to be exploited at either end of the scale or at any point in between. M. Jean Yonnel's interpretation was a masterpiece of compromise, beautifully conveyed in terms of superb miming and glorious sonority of tone. Imagine our English Charles II in one of those black depressions known to every debauchee, smear that mask with Oil of Chadband, and you have a faint idea of this grand performance. I hope next week to deal with Racine's *Phèdre*, and to pay some compliments deferred through lack of space.

July 8, 1945

La Comédie Française—II

New Theatre

PHÈDRE. By Racine

THE rôle of Phèdre is the most exacting imposed by any dramatist on any woman player in the long history of the theatre. The actress must do more than strike twelve at once; she must make it apparent at her first entry that for Phèdre the clock has struck twelve for the last time, and that for her the sands of life have run out. And all in the way of an actress's business. "No doubt," wrote Montague, "everything felt pretty much the same as usual to Rachel on the night when a shy, fiery-eyed, little school-marm, who was to make her immortal, strayed into the house." It is the duty of Phèdre to make us feel as Vashti made Charlotte feel. Hell must be written on the straight, haughty brow; the voice must be tuned to the notes of torment. . . .

Let us see how two actresses have done this. Hear Lewes on Rachel:

What a picture she was as she entered! You felt that she was wasting away under the fire within, that she was standing on the verge of the grave with pallid face, hot eyes, emaciated frame—an awful, ghastly apparition. The slow deep mournful toning of her apostrophe to the sun, especially that close—

Soleil! je te viens voir pour la dernière fois—

produced a thrill which vibrates still in the memory.

Next I take W. T. Arnold on Sarah:

The greatest Phèdre has hitherto been that of Rachel. It is useless to dilate upon Rachel's tragic power. The doubtful question is whether she was capable of rendering the tenderness and the infinite piteousness of the hapless woman as she rendered her transports of passion. We can conceive Rachel as having been better than Mme Bernhardt in the denunciation of Oenone;

but we should like to know how Rachel said such passages as this:

Oenone, il peut quitter cet orgueil qui te blesse;
Nourri dans les forêts, il en a la rudesse.
Hippolyte, endurci par de sauvages lois,
Entend parler d'amour pour la première fois:
Peut-être sa surprise a causé son silence;
Et nos plaintes peut-être ont trop de violence.

The inexpressible tenderness with which those lines were sighed rather than spoken was all Mme Bernhardt's own.

Well, there you have Phèdre at both ends of the scale, and perhaps one may say with fairness that Mlle Marie Bell occupies the middle position. At her first entry her visage, far from being wasted, is not even wann'd. And she does not totter; we do not believe that the royal legs (Racine specifies knees) are about to give way. Neither—and I must take responsibility for a personal opinion—has this actress great pathos, and we are to remember that pathos is a natural gift and not an intellectual quality. On the other hand, it is obvious that she has dabbled in the grand tradition, and again, one reflects that to dabble and to be steeped are two different things. Great line after great line comes along, and we are not moved. Surely

On ne voit point deux fois le rivage des morts,
must conjure up the image of death or it is nothing? Mlle Bell gives us little of this; her countenance, refusing to be ravaged, brings to the sullens of Wastwater the petulance of Buttermere. On the other hand let it be said that the verse is always beautifully spoken, and that one line, in my opinion, makes better sense than Sarah used. This is the line:

Oui, prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée.

Hippolyte has told the Queen that he appreciates her being—to use a modern vulgarism—on fire about his father. Whereupon follows the Queen's famous Declaration, running to twenty-nine lines, at the twenty-first of which—

L'amour m'en eût d'abord inspiré la pensée—

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Hippolyte becomes aware of what his stepmother is driving at. Only at this line, and not a hemistich before, Sarah gave the Queen away. Mlle Bell utters the first line with impatience, as much as to say, "You silly little idiot, but of course I love your father!" Which is right. Fine, too, is the denunciation of Oenone, and the last scene is, let me say, an accomplished piece of synthetic pathos.

No praise could be too high for the Hippolyte of M. Jacques Dacqmine and the Thésée of M. Jean Yonnel. The first is the personification of youth and grace and generous emotion; the second imposes by its qualities of stateliness and nobility, by its decorum, in a word. Théràmène and his unending *Récit*? It needs a talent like that of M. Maurice Chambreuil to prove that this avalanche of verbosity can be endured and even enjoyed. And how beautifully M. Yonnel listens!

We say good-bye to our visitors with regret. May they come again soon!

July 15, 1945

Two Music Halls

ME AND MY GIRL. (Revival.) A Musical Comedy by
L. Arthur Rose and Douglas Furber. Music by Noel Gay
Victoria Palace

VARIETY
Prince of Wales

Is it possible that wit is dateless and ageless, and that humour belongs to its own day and time? Who now can see any fun in Corporal Nym's repeated "That's the humour of it"? But wait. Can it be that Shakespeare didn't mean to be funny, intending no more than a catch-phrase at the expense of Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour*, produced in 1598, *Henry V* following in 1599? And then again I should want a philologist to tell me whether humour in the dictionary sense of "giving ideas an incongruous or fantastic turn" had come into use before the turn of the century. And how about modern reaction to the things the Corporal found humorous—throat-cutting, rapier-scouring, gut-pricking? Macbeth tells us how his "fell of hair Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir As life were in't." And I believe eight centuries to have made enough difference to permit Dickens's Rachel Wardle to have read *The Castle of Otranto*, Poe's *Tales*, or to-day's most lurid thriller without turning a hair. Whereas one glance at *Le Rire* or *The New Yorker* would have sent her shrieking to bed. Are we sure that even a master like Sid Field could make to-day's music-hall audience laugh at Grimaldi's songs about hot codlins and oysters crossed in love? Is it a calendar coincidence which makes me quote Henley's

None, none can keep the years in line.
And what to Ninety-Eight is fun
May raise the gorge of Ninety-Nine!

Fortunately, bless the human heart, there are some "incongruities and fantastications" which are, so to speak, born funny. A fat man chasing his hat in a high wind. Or one who, seeking to impose

like Mr Dombey, is orange-peel'd into the gutter. The admirable *Me and my Girl*, now successfully revived at the Victoria Palace, has a scene in which Lupino Lane, practising deportment in his peer's robes, sails the stage and comes to anchor on a chair, thereafter riding the crimson, ermine-flecked sea like any monarch by Winterhalter. Three times he achieves the feat with success, but at the fourth attempt *il culbute*. (I use French here since the literary image, which should be the equivalent of the visual, is one known only to Billingsgate and Covent Garden.) This feat must always be funny, and will be funny on the eve of Doomsday provided it be brought off by one who is himself a droll. It was about Grock that Walkley wrote:

I see that these tricks, which in action send one into convulsions of laughter, are not ludicrous, are not to be realized at all in narrative. It is the old difficulty of transposing the comic from three dimensions into two—and when the comic becomes the grotesque, and that extreme form of the grotesque which constitutes the clownesque, then the difficulty becomes sheer impossibility.

Better perhaps to have said that Grock was Grock, and have left it at that. Just as I am content to say that Lane is Lane, and to leave him flat on his back, sunk like the day-star in the ocean bed, his coronet heaving gently with the wave. If fun may have its pulpit here is the music hall's *Cathédrale Engloutie*.

That every artist should abound in his own sense was never truer than in the music hall. Nobody knew this better than Little Tich exploiting dwarfishness, and the elder Formby revelling in melancholy. So in the new bill at the Prince of Wales we have whichever of Forsythe, Seamon and Farrell is the lady turning, as Falstaff would have said, "fatness to commodity." Sophie Tucker had a song the burden of which was "O how a fat girl can love!" And I say, O how a fat girl can do everything else, from sending the grand piano reeling with a mere flick of the wrist, to a collapse on the floor which is like the foundering, not of some cumbrous vessel but of a whole argosy. Wonderful, heart-warming artist! The Colleano family abounds in its sense of articulation as anato-

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mists understand that word. And if these acrobats, as funny as they are adroit, present no new programme, one feels that it is for the same reason that one high sea is like another. There is nothing upon which sea or acrobats can improve.

Max Miller promises his audience an essay in the Rabelaisian, though he puts it more simply. Like Lear threatening to say such things—what they are, yet he knows not; but they shall be the terrors of the earth. And then, wisely, this brilliant and subtle comedian does not say them. Bobbie Kimber, the new lady ventriloquist, asks us to believe that in her repertoire is the speaking voice of a basso profundo; is it possible that here one senses a virtuosity of simulation unrivalled since Barrette? Finally, if I must lay my hand on my heart and swear to the best turn in a magnificent bill, I think I must say Jimmy James, in whom the old music hall of Harry Champion comes to life again. I have no space to deal with Mr James and shall merely bid readers hie them to this theatre and there “gather and surmise.”

August 19, 1945

Yesterday and To-day

LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN. (Revival.) By Oscar Wilde

Haymarket

SIGH NO MORE. A Revue by Noel Coward

Piccadilly

WHEN 'Omer smote 'is bloomin' lyre." You know the rest—how market girls and fishermen knew that the poet stole, and how he knew that they knew. How Homer winked at the shepherds and the sailors, who winked back. Whereas Wilde stole in handfuls, all over the place, unwinkingly, trusting to getting away with it, which he did. Probably very few people in the audience on that far-away first-night realized that the serious part of this epatifying comedy was a mass of filchings. Rightly any good audience condones the borrower who appropriates so cleverly that it doesn't twig, or so wittily that, twiggling, it doesn't care. But in 1892 the question wasn't raised: who first made this play out of what was immaterial. It is only after fifty years that the ordinary playgoer has come to realize that Wilde's thinking was both unoriginal and shoddy. And here it behoves him to remember that Wilde was groping in that theatrical dark which preceded the dawn of the problem play. That only the plainest women had been to see Ibsen's *Doll's House*. That only frumps and Fabians awaited *Widowers' Houses*. That it was not until the following year's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* that the serious drama was deemed a subject for the dinner-table.

Why, then, revive *Lady Windermere's Fan*? First, because of the opportunity it gives scene-designer and dressmaker. I give precedence to the trimmings out of compliment to Mr Cecil Beaton, who ravishes the eye while making hay of the realities. I agree that this must always happen with too-near period pieces, unless, of course, one is going to believe that in the 'nineties men and women went to the theatre to see the chairs they sat on and the clothes they wore. And why, pray, should a Victorian play be dressed Edward-

dianly? Why not go further, Mr B.? Why not be really self-expressive? Why not bring on the characters wrapped in cellophane, and at their first entry unpack them? But I extravagate. Better to record that on Tuesday night the impact of the clothes was such that strong men and weak women must have fainted had not the wallpapers acted on them like smelling-salts. The second and better reason for revival is the play's wit. This is superb throughout, and inferior—may one think?—to Congreve and Sheridan only in this, that it does not grow out of the character but is sprinkled indifferently over fool and fop, like a gross feeder with the pepper-pot. Which brings me to the playing. Well, there were beautiful performances by Mr Michael Shepley as Lord Augustus, Mr Denys Blakelock as Cecil Graham, and Mr Deering Wells as Dumbly. Two ladies wore their tiaras as tiaras should be worn; these were Miss Athene Seyler as the Duchess of Berwick, and Miss Phyllis Relph as Lady Jedburgh. The rest of the characters, male and female, hadn't the air. What they did was very nice, but it wasn't the Mayfair of those days. Miss Dorothy Hyson's Lady Windermere should really listen to herself and consider whether personal pronouns do not sound better when they are unstressed. Miss Isabel Jeans's Mrs Erlynne? Well, the fault is largely Wilde's. If this hybrid is the good woman Marion Terry made of her, the pepper-box is out of place; if the witticisms are in character, we reflect that cruet-stands should be without compunction. Miss Jeans falls between two stools only because every actress in this part must. Be it conceded that she goes down with her colours—and what colours!—flying.

The best things in Mr Coward's latest are as follows. The exquisite, spindly, Dufy-like décor by Mrs Calthrop. The tunes. The shattering *Backfischerei* of Miss Joyce Grenfell—Lewis Carroll is the father of that grin with which the maddening child greets misfortune, a grin which grows, and grows, and GROWS. The grace and agility of Miss Madge Elliott lightly triumphant over Time ("I haven't done this since I was a girl"). The resolute, undefeatable glitter of Mr Cyril Ritchard. A haunting little sketch about the Companion whose summer wanes beyond retrieval; this is the other side of Sir Osbert Sitwell's immortal story of Miss

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Collier-Floodgaye and Miss Bramley. (Very good help by Mr Alan Clive.) A Pageant in which Miss Josephine Wray, as Gloriana with one eye occluded by her crown, knights the wrong person. A ditty entitled *Matelot* to which Mr Graham Payn brings a genuine sensitiveness. Last, on the principle that the best form of defence is attack, Mr Coward includes some jokes against himself, notably the ballet entitled *Blithe Spirit*. Anxious, as always, to help, I permit myself a suggestion. We have had this masterpiece acted, filmed, broadcast, mimed, puppeted, danced, shadowgraphed —*que sais-je?* Can we now have it crooned, please? I suggest Southend pier on the last day of the season, after which it could be dropped, decently and without fuss, into the sea.

August 26, 1945

York Points the Way

THE SPINSTER OF SOUTH STREET. By R. F. Delderfield
King's, Hammersmith

No actor's Hamlet suffers in comparison with another's; the part defies monopoly. But there is an undoubted corner in lesser parts. Not in my lifetime shall I see the equal of Edward Terry's Dick Phenyl or Dame Irene Vanbrugh's Sophy Fullgarney. If I did see their equal I *should deem them less good*. (The question is one not of age but of impact.) Which means that to be deemed as good the new presentation would have to be at least three times better! As with rôles so with the subjects of plays. It is quite possible that some Bright Young Spark has a better play up his sleeve—no hair-splitting, please, about what is and what is not a play—than Mr Shaw's *St Joan*. But he would be a wiser and more sensible spark to break fresh ground and avoid a subject which has already been superbly treated. And that, my chickabiddies, to borrow a colleague's graceful phrase, is that.

In *The Lady with a Lamp* Reginald Berkeley used up all the, theatrically speaking, best Florence Nightingale material—the early love-affair, the business at Scutari, the tiffs with authority, the losing battle against Mrs Herbert, the refusal to meet the Grand Old Man, and finally the Grand Old Woman herself receiving the O.M. in a haze of white shawl fading into nothingness. Was this the whole picture? Perhaps not. But it was all of the picture that would be effective on the stage. Now comes Mr Delderfield to glean what remains, and it isn't very much. A Great Lady once told me that she remembered sitting as a child beside Queen Victoria's footstool and hearing her say, "We have been having a great deal of trouble with dear Miss Nightingale." In this "trouble" lies the whole scope and range of the new play, in which Miss Jean Forbes-Robertson, implacable as Mr F.'s Aunt, continually repeats her inexorable and awful warning, "There's hold-ups on the Netley road!" This is reiterated so often that one begins to think one

would rather be in Netley Hospital than hear any more of it. How about the Hammersmith audience, most of whom had presumably not seen Berkeley's play? I imagine that they too must have found this little affair static and unenterprising. Characters appeared and disappeared, leaving no mark. Episode succeeded episode and ostensibly became a melting-pot for a third episode, and behold! they were all the same episode. To put it bluntly, there wasn't any play. "Too kind, too kind!" said Miss Nightingale at the end of Berkeley's drama. If there was not much applause the other evening, it was because the audience was nodding and murmuring, "Too tired, too tired!"

It is said that criticism should be constructive, though personally I have never been able to see how you can constructively criticize anything *after* it has been built, except by telling the builder to pull it down and rebuild it in this or that way. I permit myself, however, to offer two pieces of advice which may serve Mr Delderfield in the future. One. Let him realize that the essence of playwriting is to show character *in action*. Two. Let him avoid as subjects Queen Elizabeth, Mary Queen of Scots, Charles I, Charles II, the Prince Regent, Victoria, Dr Johnson, Garrick, Charles Lamb, the Brownings. But I could occupy my whole space with Subjects To Leave Alone. On the other hand I just don't see how, in view of Mr Baliol Holloway's last act, Mr Delderfield can possibly avoid writing a play about Mr Gladstone!

The most significant thing about this production is that it is the work of the York Festival Company, presented by the York Citizens Theatre Trust Ltd. I take this to be a sign that the work of decentralizing the theatre has begun. I imagine that Matthew Arnold, if he were alive to-day, would write not "organize the theatre" but "scatter the theatre." And rightly. Analysis of London's dramatic programmes at the moment shows eight musical shows—this does not include the accredited music halls—and eight obstinate successes, some in their fourth and fifth year. The Haymarket rightly revels in the masterpieces of the past, and the New promises to be once more the home of Shakespeare. Allowing for half a dozen farces and light comedies, this means that out of London's thirty theatres—I cannot make them more in view of

recent events—only six are conceivably available for the young, arriving, experimental playwright. This may be good for the business of theatrical entertainment; it is not in the best interests of the drama as a factor in the spiritual life of the country. It is a sorry state of affairs when a play by Mr Priestley is compelled to seek its first-night in Moscow. The remedy? The establishment of a number of dramatic capitals, say at Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Leeds, Birmingham, Derby, Bristol, Portsmouth, Hull. It should be done and it is being done. Plays and actors must be the best available, and the audiences will follow. (The York company is admirable throughout, and better plays will come along.) And presently the essential *cachet* will accrue. I am convinced that whereas what London hankers after is ‘an evening out’ what the provinces hunger for is the art of drama.

September 2, 1945

Stage and Life

THE HASTY HEART. By John Patrick
Aldwych

YOUNG MRS BARRINGTON. By Warren Chetham Strode
Winter Garden

IN his Memoirs Legouv  describes the difficulty that he and Scribe had with *Adrienne Lecouvreur* and how that romantic melodrama refused to come right. It wouldn't keep in its period, it seemed. Then one morning Scribe arrived smiling and saying, "I've got it! There must be a little Abb  to pull the thing together." And the little Abb  was duly inserted. What is wanted in Mr John Patrick's *The Hasty Heart* is a fool of a medical officer—let this *rara avis* be granted—the last-minute discovery of whose foolishness will hold this comedy together and keep it in its own plane. For make no mistake—the piece *is* a comedy and a riotous one. And I submit that you cannot have a riotous comedy written round a dying man. This play reeks of the theatre—not a bad thing to reek of so long as you're clear about what it is that reeks. This is not Burma but a stage-set cleverly pretending to be Burma. These are not an American, an Australian, and a New Zealander but three delightful actors in full spate of impersonation. This British Tommy is neither more Cockney nor less Cockney than the same good comedian's macaroni-seller in *A Night in Venice* was Cockney. And not for one minute do I believe in the play's central figure. Here is not the author's pig-headed, ignorant, lowland Scot but a screen Adonis possessed of a carefully simulated Scots accent. And I believe least of all in a nurse spicker than Colbert and spanner than Garson, preserving a handbox *chic* in defiance of Burma's heat and flies, and willing at a moment's notice to marry a patient with one ailing kidney and six weeks to live if it will be of any comfort to him, poor darling!

This is where my fool of an M.O. comes in. In the last minute he should be superseded by a sounder doctor pronouncing the

hero's remaining kidney to be perfectly good, whereupon the key of comedy would be confirmed. You cannot, I repeat, write a comedy about a dying man who is really dying. If you do, it must be a tragi-comedy. And you must stage any such tragi-comedy realistically, and give it a cast less pleasing than the heart-warming one assembled by Mr Firth Shephard at the Aldwych. On the other hand, I am prepared to believe that the piece will stir the Average British Playgoer to his depths. For the A.B.P. has much in common with Dickens's Major Bagstock of delicious memory: "Mr Dombey, Sir, Joey B. is not in general a man of sentiment, for Joseph is tough. But Joe has his feelings, Sir, and when they *are* awakened—Damme, Mr Dombey, this is weakness, and I won't submit to it!" In the theatre nothing pleases the A.B.P. more than to recognize sentiment as weakness and yield to it. J.A. in general is not a man of sentiment. But J.A. has his feelings. Damme, Mr Shephard, this piece on its own lines is an immense success.

Oddly enough I believed that the elder Mrs Barrington's house was situated at Kingston-on-Thames. But then Miss Elliot Mason saw to that as she sees to everything she adorns, bless her warm, sensible heart and more than considerable talent! I believed in Mrs Barrington's younger son, brilliantly played by Mr Peter Hammond as a compound of the ventriloquist's Charlie McCarthy and any unlicked Thames-side cub. If this young gentleman can find other ways of being funny he is going to be an actor. I entirely believed, too, in the next-door neighbour of Miss Joan Haythorne. This was a beautiful performance.

The Air Force hero returning after four years to find that the cuddlesome little thing he had married had developed into a strong-minded creature with a will of her own? It took most of clever Mr Tom Gill's time to make me believe in the simple fellow. And all of Miss Leueen MacGrath's time to make me believe in her emancipated chit, perhaps because I hold that the confidential secretaries of backroom colonels should be sufficiently advanced in grammar not to commit solecisms like "Let you and I start again." I longed to take this over-intense young woman on one side and tell her to apply to her airman the treatment that Barrie's Maggie Wylie

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applied to John Shand. However, Miss MacGrath did very well with the tiresome puss. And Mr Ivan Sampson, as the colonel awaiting a serious operation, bore himself with the resolution of an officer knowing he is about to have both kidneys removed! Mr Warren Chetham Strode's piece will succeed because it is built on the lines of Abel Hermant's recipe for a popular success: *La pièce chaste, un peu cochonne, avec une pointe de sentiment*. Chastity on Wednesday night was rampantly on view, and there was any amount of sentiment. As for Hermant's middle qualification, my ears discovered one or two lines which would have crimsoned those of Mr Patrick's Native from Basutoland, or wherever it was.

September 9, 1945

A Point of Integrity

A BELL FOR ADANO. By Paul Osborn. Based on a Novel
by John Hersey
Phoenix

I AM no transmogrifier. I do *not* want to see *Gerontius* danced, hear the *Eroica* arranged for string quartet, or *Das Lied von der Erde* transcribed for piano-accordion. I do *not* want to read *Tartuffe* as a novel, or see *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* dramatized. I just don't believe in the artistic impulse behind the transmogrification. Let us take X, the author of that best-seller, *Peepshow for Cyclops*. I just don't believe that one morning X's agent goes to him and says, "Look here, are you quite sure that the novel was the best vehicle for your book's tremendous message? I see it as a play, and so do Messitabout Ltd. Of course a lot of it will have to go, and you'll have to change the setting from Biarritz to Blackpool. As a matter of fact I mentioned it to Dumkopf who has produced a version which will stir Streatham to its depths." Or that a couple of years later the agent goes again to X and says, using the grammar of his kind, "Look here, between you and I that play notion didn't quite work out. I see *P. for C.* as a film. In fact, so does Struwell, who wants to produce and suggests Peter as director. Let's look this thing in the face. Get it straight. See what I mean? You and me aren't out for money; what we want is to get your great message to Surbiton. You'll have to make changes, of course. Turn your British soldier into an American marine and substitute Bataan for Blackpool—one can't overlook the financial side, much as one would wish to. But there you are. As I see it this film will take the suburbs by the scruff of their necks and shake them until they haven't any morale left. Get it?" I wouldn't mind these well-intentioned worsifications. But I just don't believe they happen. I believe the agent goes to X and says, "Look here, just cut that artistic bunk, will ya? Jeezers, are you crackers? Turn *Peepshow for Cyclops* into a play somebody can

make a film of afterwards! What, you won't? Well, then, let Hymie Greenstuff do it. You remember how I got him to dramatize Thorpit's *Fresh Woods*? *New Pastures* I think they called it. Anyhow, within a week of the first night we sold it to G-M-G, who made a film out of it for Harry Twitch. *Blue Mantle*, they called it, and it cleaned up everywhere."

Now I don't think that artists can serve two masters, let alone three. The artist who allows his work to be monkeyed about with must be satisfied with the financial results of monkeying, which are doubtless enormous. But he is not going to get critical tribute from me. Every moment of *A Bell for Adano* screams that it was not conceived as a play. It never begins to have the total gesture, the compactness that a play should have, with the result that you never quite know in what direction it is heading. Is it the story of a good man fighting against officialdom? Yes, if you like. Well, Ibsen made a first-rate play out of a noble, woolly-minded but determined fuss-pot who wasn't going to have his townspeople poisoned by drinking contaminated bath water. Is red tape stretched across the road to Adano, thus preventing the entry of the town's water-carts? Also good. But somebody should have found the answer to the question: Has Sicily no buckets? What becomes of the peccant Mayor who is afraid of being shot in the back? What is the significance of the synthetic blonde who has as much use for her Sicilian kinsfolk as Hedda Gabler had for Tesman's aunts? Why must she lose her fiancé if the play is not affected? And the head fisherman (Frederick Valk) who obviously ought to be magnoperating at Swiss Cottage as John Gabriel Borkman? What happens to the Major's wife, sitting alone somewhere in America? And why is the Major given a wife, unless the playwright is going to make of that relationship the kind of thing Tchegov made of the Vershinins? What happens to good players like Mr Milo Sperber and Miss Selma Vaz Dias who come like shadows and so depart? Why keep Mr Bonar Colleano Jun. hanging about the stage all night looking as though he was going to do something any minute and never allowing him to do it? And why, lastly, call the hero of any play Joppolo?

"Melancholy trisyllable of sound, unison to Nincompoop and

every name vituperative under heaven.” Would not Mr Shandy have asked whether we had remembered, read, or heard tell of a man called Joppolo performing anything great or worth recording? I have tried all the variations. Boppolo, Coppolo, Doppolo, Foppolo, Goppolo, Moppolo—fond spouse would of course be Mrs Moppolo—Oppolo, Sloppolo, Toppolo, Woppolo. Too much of a handicap to lay on any actor. Mr Robert Beatty gives an excellent performance, and if it is all on one note it is not his fault, since the best actor in the world cannot sound two notes where his playwright has given him only one.

The production? Yes and no. Why must there be two chandeliers in a room which would be overlit by one? Why must all the actors bellow like sea-lions conversing with walruses on the further side of an ice-floe in a blizzard? In plain English this to me was a boring play, and I am not to be restrained from saying so by the most dazzling assembly of first-nighters the solar system has ever seen declaring this obvious potboiler to be the real thing at last. Nor will the ten years’ run for which it is obviously booked alter my judgment by a hair’s-breadth.

September 23, 1945

A Great Falstaff

HENRY IV, PART I. By William Shakespeare
New

ENGLAND," announces the programme. And who is to set the first half of this great play in its country and period? Not, one thinks, the wan and shaken King, nor yet his priggish, pragmatical son; and surely the Percys and the Mortimers, Douglasses and Glendowers have long been piffle before the wind of time. Does anybody really care what wars were happening, or what river comes cranking in whom? In the second half . . . but stay a moment. It is as idle to exalt the second half of this play over the first as to prefer October to June, nip to flame; the first is a play for boys; the second is for old boys. To return to the spirit, sense, sound, sight, feel, and taste of England. In the second part Shakespeare permits himself a whole company of Englanders—the country justices, the recruits, the old sweats, a tavern hostess drawn at full length, and that immortal harlotry Doll Tearsheet. All these surround Falstaff, who, in the first part, must bear the brunt alone. Can the actor essaying Falstaff do it? "Ay," we answer for Richardson, "and twenty such!" Meaning that in this brain it snows of twenty Englands.

Hazlitt tells us of Liston that "his jaws seem to ache with laughter; his eyes look out of his head with wonder; his face is unctuous all over and bathed with jests; the tip of his nose is tickled with conceit of himself, and his teeth chatter in his head in the eager insinuation of a plot; his forehead speaks, and his wig (not every particular hair, but the whole bewildered bushy mass) stands on end as life were in it." In the past I have had occasion to indicate, regretfully, the rôles Mr Richardson could not fill. Rôles to which he brought no more than the competence of a fine actor labouring at the uncongenial. Now at last comes the time when I can legitimately quote the great critic, again on Liston, "He does some characters but

indifferently, others respectably; when he *puts himself whole* into a jest, it is unrivall'd."

Mr Richardson put himself whole on Wednesday night into the great joke which is Falstaff. He had everything the part wants—the exuberance, the mischief, the gusto, in a word. Falstaff is more than a "stuffed cloak-bag of guts." He is also "reverend vice" and "grey iniquity." Meaning two things. First, that the old toper, sornor, fribble still keeps some of his fallen day about him; second, that he is conscious of his own enormities. Would it be true to say of this Falstaff that he has "more comic humour, more power of face and a more genial and happy vein of folly, than any other we remember"? Yes, but for Weir, whose Falstaff I saw fifty years ago and about which I read next morning: "It is impossible to describe the drollery of this voice, or the most ludicrous impression which it gives of a periodical overflow and escape of sound from some perpetual roar in the interior of the actor's person. . . . Mr Weir succeeds brilliantly in filling his audience early on with the central idea of the character, and from then onward one is inclined at every moment of his presence on the stage, even when he is silent or doing little, to break into uncontrollable fits of laughter merely at the picture of such a man walking and talking." Well, what does it matter, Weir or Richardson? The new Falstaff is a piece of great acting in its own day, and right from the Rowlandson-like legs up past the obstreperous hurdle of belly to that contumacious, unsanctified halo.

Hotspur is not a first-rate part, being little more than a trumpet solo and in the "pluck bright honour" speech a coach-horn tootle. Mr Olivier does with it what he can and more than anybody in my time has done, humanizing the heroics and at the end touching the whole to a noble pathos. It was a stroke of genius to make the bright youth stammer only at the letter "w," so that his last words become "and food for w—," immediately taken up by the Prince's "for worms, brave Percy." Mr Michael Warre is not yet up to the Prince's weight; this stripling would have got the better of Hotspur only on the theory that ash can tilt successfully at oak. Mr Nicholas Hannen bore himself with great dignity as the King, and I liked very much Mr George Relph's Worcester. A noble, well-conceived

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setting by Mr Gower Parks, good costumes by Mr Roger Furse, first-rate evocative music by Mr Herbert Menges, and a production by Mr John Burrell which would leave even the captious nothing to cavil at. In short, the Old Vic has made magnificent re-entry.

September 30, 1945

Falstaff Again

HENRY IV, PART II. By William Shakespeare
New

I REMEMBER at St Andrews asking a ginger-bearded caddie blasted with antiquity which was the better golfer, young Tom Morris or Bobby Jones. He replied witheringly, "The twa o' them played pairfect gowff!" Why, of two perfect plays, should the second have proved, on the whole, disappointing? In *Henry IV, Part I*, Shakespeare had given us his Falstaff, and, just as Charles Lamb did not wish the moon to be any rounder, so here was a sun that not even his great creator could make more incandescent. Nor was there any meridian not yet attained; all that could be done was to show the great luminary in descent. And since clouds are necessary to give the setting sun his proper effulgence Shakespeare in Part II took care to surround Falstaff with *reflecting* characters—Pistol, Doll Tearsheet, and the country justices. Of the two last let it be said at once that they were perfectly played by Mr Olivier and Mr Malleeson peering through eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, tapering nose exploring chinlessness—the perfect jig-saw of eld.

At the moment of his first entry it was obvious that Mr Relph was not the actor for Pistol, a part which must be spoken, to use Hamlet's phrase, "with most miraculous organ." Pistol throughout is burlesquing Marlowe's mighty line, and mighty lines must be mightily delivered. "There roar'd the sea, and trumpet-clangor sounds." "Nay, rather damn them with King Cerberus; and let the welkin roar." "And are etceteras nothing?" One felt like asking whether larynx and vocal cords are nothing. It is not this good actor's fault—one indicated last week how good an actor he is—that Nature has not given him a voice like Stentor and Mr George Jackley combined. Actors are conditioned by their limitations, and Mr Relph is not to blame that the most he can do is to roar as gently as sucking-dove or nightingale. Acting is not a moral

question—this critic is no judge passing sentence but merely a witness giving more or less expert evidence to the effect that this was a Pistol with a silencer.

Sarah Bernhardt wrote, "There is a fitness of things intellectual, and a fitness of things physical, and the latter should receive as much attention as the former." (I have a feeling that I have quoted this before. *Tant mieux!*) And Ellen Terry amplified this by saying to her pupils, "Always go with the stream. Make your bad points fight for you as well as your good." No actress can play Doll Tearsheet unless she has something of the shrew in her physical make-up, and to ask Miss Redman to attempt shrewishness is like asking one of Botticelli's lambs to impersonate one of Blake's tigers. Miss Redman may bestrew her hair as she pleases, but it is of no avail. The part is pure trollop, and moreover trollop of the year 1413, and Miss Redman neither looks this nor gives us the impression that she feels it. Here, then, is the setting Falstaff with two "looming bastions fringed with fire," who refuse to loom and are not fringed.

This brings me to the Prince of Wales. Let it be said that Mr Michael Warre was better in this second half than he had been in the first. That he spoke every line with good accent, good discretion, and considerable feeling. But the part, alas, wants something more: a glittering something, a superbity with which an actor must be endowed by Nature. Either he has this or he has it not, and if he have it not no amount of brains belonging to him, the producer, the whole body of critics or the stage cat will help him! Prince Hals don't grow on gooseberry bushes? Agreed. But are we sure that all the country's gooseberry bushes have been looked over?

That I have wandered from Falstaff does not mean any lessening in admiration. Wisely, Mr Richardson is content in this second part not to do but to be. If he has some difficulty in the tavern scenes it is, as has been suggested, because he is not supported. But he presides at that recruiting-table with the most admirable mellowness. Like all great Falstaffs his heart warms to Feeble, for though the old rascalion may not practise valour, he knows what it is. It is a beautiful moment when, having possessed himself

of Shallow's thousand pounds, Sir John is content to sit and muse upon the folly of his benefactor. How readily he jumps to Pistol's mood, and how beautifully he mocks him with his "O base Assyrian knight," and the demand that "King Cophetua know the truth" of his news. Here is something better than virtuosity in character-acting—the spirit of the part shining through the actor. Only two things will I make bold to ask. The first is that Mr Richardson will never again omit the line, "I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men." The second is that he be given the whole stage for his final humiliation and exit. Sunsets demand the whole sky; the greatest of all comic creations should not be bundled out through the wings.

After acclaiming beautiful performances by Messrs Harcourt Williams and Nicholas Hannen, one tiny criticism remains. This is that the costume of Master Brian Parker's Page should be reconsidered. In view of the company he is forced to keep this urchin must be gutter-snipe; his apparel—white samite or something of the sort—is such that one is in momentary expectation of seeing Falstaff translated and hearing him say, "Scratch my head, Peaseblossom."

October 7, 1945

A Complete Thing

HAMLET. By William Shakespeare
Arts

To the essay entitled *The Fight* Hazlitt appended this postscript: "Toms called upon me the next day, to ask me if I did not think the fight was a complete thing? I said I thought it was." What did W. H. mean by "complete thing"? Not that Bill Neate and the Gas-man were better boxers than Belcher or Cribb. Not that this had been the greatest of all fights. I think he meant that the fight was complete in itself and discussable without reference to other affrays. I thought the same thing as I watched the new Hamlet. (Players at the new game of "paranormal cognition" or "extra-sensory perception" may like to know that it was only when I turned up the essay that I realized that Hazlitt used as motto:

— The *fight*, the *fight's* the thing,
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

And remembered that the Gas-man, showing his tremendous right hand, would say, "This is *the grave-digger*." Let it be established without further ado that Mr Clunes's Hamlet is a complete thing. Not the whole of Hamlet, perhaps, but complete as far as it goes.

A countenance that is noble and not too sweet, a figure that has grace as well as virility—here are a combination and a form giving stalls and gods assurance of an actor fitted to play the Dane. The figure moves, and it seems that that part of the stage which now receives it has been waiting and eager. It speaks, and the voice is urbane, cultivated, scholarly. And now I must stop using "It," which has ghostly connotation, since the point about this Hamlet is its extraordinarily human quality. Here is a man of finer mould than most, yet willing to mix. I have not heard the "What a piece of work is a man!" and "Nay, do not think I flatter" speeches so well delivered these forty years. (Forty-eight, to be exact.) Never in my life have I heard the *prose* in this great poem better given. Nor

known better deployment of the gentle humour that is as much a part of Hamlet as his sardonicism and his melancholy. Power? No Hamlet that I remember has outdone the horror of that embrace, stepson's arms around stepfather's neck, or the venom of that "Farewell, dear mother," spat into Claudius's face.

Are there no shortcomings? Marry, plenty; whoever thinks to see a perfect Hamlet had better refresh his memory with Pope on perfection in a sister art. Against the tenderness, *droiture*, and persuasiveness of this most rational of Hamlets must be put a certain diminishment, the tidying-up effect that Montague noted about another performance. Or you might put it that nothing of the "half-lights and glooms of this monstrous Gothic castle of a poem" has been left, and that the black-out has been lifted alike in the corners of Hamlet's mind and the play. Is this because Mr Clunes takes only a staid delight in poetry? Because prose, not verse, is this actor's mistress? An eminent colleague has found, and rightly found, that "the phrases do not spring new-minted from this Hamlet's mind." Let us hope that presently they will or seem so to do. This was a first performance of a tremendous spirit-shaking rôle, and the actor may well have been concerned to see that the phrases sprang new-minted from his memory! Again, the best of new suits takes time to acquire the creases and wrinkles that, later, it appears to have been born with. Were there, in the first act, one or two false stresses? Yes, but these too will be eliminated with time. What I do not so easily forgive is the omission of the jingle about "Imperious Caesar." That Shakespeare could, wittingly or unwittingly, at this juncture, contrive something that is less than great poetry and more than doggerel, something that *in its place* is better than grandiosity's tumbling seas—this is sheer miracle. Restore the jingle, Mr Clunes. As Horatio says, you might have rhymed. You must and shall!

Claudius is always a difficulty, since one has yet to find the actor who can be "bloat" and also act. Mr Mark Dignam is brilliantly intelligent as Claudius, but nowhere conveys the sensual idea. Nor can clever Miss Lindo give Gertrude the "sleepy pear" quality. Mr Roy Malcolm, treating Polonius as though that gentle bore were Menenius in another play, brings off the experiment fairly

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successfully; Miss Dorothy Primrose's Ophelia, a little Wimbledonish at the start, steadily improves; Mr Streuli's Ghost is authentically of the cellarage, and Mr Newton Blick is a grave-digger who, knowing his place in the dramatic scheme, refuses to turn the thing into a music-hall sketch. And if the Laertes and Fortinbras of Messrs McClelland and Davies are a little dull, one should remember that all that glitters is not Repertory.

The settings and costumes are so good that one does not notice them, and the same goes for the production. In the play scene Hamlet is actually allowed to dominate the stage—a piece of common sense I have not seen put into practice since . . . But I am to remember that this Hamlet is a complete thing.

October 14, 1945

A Protest

OEDIPUS. By Sophocles. Version by W. B. Yeats

New

THE CRITIC. By Sheridan

New

'SBLOOD, as Hamlet remarked, but is there no more "to" a Greek tragedy than to a musical comedy? It is proper that after *Pass Down the Car, Please*, the producer should be haled out of the wings to praise the wardrobe mistress and tell us who arranged the dances. Proper because musical comedy has no more effect on vacant mind than summer's zephyr on standing pond. But the whole point of Greek tragedy was, one imagines, to stir the Greek mind profoundly. To send that mind home reflecting that "there is no man blessed among men." William Archer once wrote that he should be "puzzled to say off-hand what was the good of the *Oedipus* or of *Othello*." Equally I am not prepared to say what was the good of sending a Greek audience home in a mood of maximum depression. (They were not depressed? Like Mrs Gummidge, they revelled in depression? I am using a non-Greek mentality to look into a Greek one?) What I am prepared to say is that any good performance of the *Oedipus* will, by its re-statement of the age-old enigma of tragic beauty, move a modern audience to the passionate rejection of the Sophoclean doctrine that no man is to be counted happy until he is dead.

Many things have happened since that pessimistic utterance, and among them the Christian religion, the assumption of responsibility, the defiance of augury, the demand to have one's name set down in the Book of Life, the willingness to pay "glad life's arrears." Is it then not obvious that speechifying at this great play's curtain-fall *must ruin the tragedy either way*? To see him who was Oedipus dwindled to a looker-on, a cypher, a mummer with his magnanimity dropping from him visibly—surely this is to destroy all that producer, music-maker, designers of settings and

costumes, the chief actor, and his fellow-players have been at pains through many arduous weeks to create? I was immensely stirred at the fall of the curtain; the effect of the ensuing five minutes was to wipe out the tragedy I fondly imagined I had been seeing. And now let me change the subject.

The wheel has a way of coming full circle, as a young intellectual explained to me recently. Only the puppy put it that the pendulum has a way of coming full cycle! I was being talked to, coached anticipatorily and in view of this production, about moral responsibility and how there's no such thing. "Don't you see that Man has no choice in the matter of his actions? That if he is a murderer it is only because the will to murder is stronger in him than the non-will. You, sir, are not a murderer, because your desire to refrain from homicide is stronger than the temptation to commit it. To any reasoning mind thug and victim are equally blameless. Man-slaughterers should be put out of the way, not because they are nasty fellows, which they are not, but to discourage the others." I said, "What will discouragement avail since the others have no control over their actions?" Whereupon my mentor bethought him of an engagement and took himself off.

The connexion between the Sophoclean view of tragedy and my young intellectual? Just this, that Oedipus is not guilty, and cannot be called a sinner, since he did not know what he was doing and *the sin is in the will, not in the material act*. He is a murderer, but only in the Bloomsbury sense of having no choice, his will being subject not to natural bent but to the whim of capricious gods. But let us have Lemaître in his own words:

This truth, which to us appears so simple, was not much realized in those days, and that is why Sophocles wrote the drama. And knowing this truth himself he wrote also *Antigone* and *Oedipus Coloneus*. In this latter tragedy Oedipus comes to discover that he was not at fault; he is, indeed, on such terms with the gods that his tomb will bring happiness to the people who possess it . . . I will admit that if, the other evening, *Oedipe Roi* had been followed by *Oedipe à Colonne* the first of these tragedies would have appeared to me in quite another light.

A PROTEST

I am to say here that first the producer's speech and then the Sheridan romp successfully dowsed whatever light I had seen the tragedy in. In the world of opera, where the sublime and the ridiculous are one, these grotesqueries of juxtaposition are not tolerated. At the end of *Tristan* no producer comes forward to thank Messrs Squills for the love-philtre, or Messrs Cordage and Wain for the new rigging. Nor, in that world, do they follow *Elektra* with *The Pirates of Penzance*. I confess to finding Mr Olivier's Puff unbearable and unseeable in this contiguity. Would Irving have followed Hamlet with Jingle? No. And I departed, declining to entertain an Oedipuff complex. Instead, I found myself thinking about the Greek Chorus in a most un-Greek way. Had it been, I reflected with Groucho Marx, a case of one man with fifteen beards, or fifteen men with one beard?

He who enacted Oedipus? I seem to remember a great cry, a swift flight, and a moving episode with some children of a compellingness to make me play with the notion of Mr Olivier as Great Actor. But something has wiped cry and flight and pathos from my mind. Dame Sybil Thorndike's Jocasta? Mr Curzon's Creon? Mr Richardson's Tiresias? Mr Malleson's Messenger? Mr Relph's Herdsman? I seem to remember being moved. But by whom, and to what extent, and in what passages, has gone. I think I was tickled by Mr John Piper's décor, and impressed by Mr Anthony Hopkins's evocative dissonances. But of the rest, nothing. Dr Johnson held it to be "a vain endeavour to cultivate barrenness, or to paint upon vacuity." Holding that it is equally vain for a critic to write out of an empty mind, I desist and withdraw.

October 21, 1945

World's Fiddlesticks!

I HAVE been reading with much interest and delight, and some exasperation, Mr A. C. Ward's *Specimens of English Dramatic Criticism XVII-XX Centuries*, published by the Oxford University Press in the World's Classics series. It is proper that I should warn readers at this stage that my judgment of this book may possibly be biased. This is the second anthology of its kind in our language, the ground being first broken by *The English Dramatic Critics, 1660-1932*, of which I had the honour to be the compiler.

The earlier book contained nobody who was not a dramatic critic by profession. Let me now preach what I practised. As a dramatic critic I begrudge the space given in this book to Pepys, Fielding, Julian Charles Young, Ruskin, Alice Meynell, Hugh Walpole, Virginia Woolf. None of these seven was a professional dramatic critic; each has a place in a book of writings about the theatre, from which Charlotte Brontë could not be omitted, as she is here. "Include me out," said the Hollywood film-magnate, and in my view this principle should have been adopted, thus making room for W. T. Arnold, Allan Monkhouse, Arthur Symons, Ashley Dukes, Charles Morgan, and others who have done noble work and should be nobly remembered. Three articles in the *Irish Times* on Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* are not worth their space since they deal largely with the political aspects of the play and its truth or untruth to Irish character, and have nothing to say about the poetry and dramatic power of this new voice. Not a word about the artist in Synge. And here is Montague aching to be quoted:

Synge, within [his] limits, found or shaped a rhythm of his own so far beyond the commoner music of this speech that it is said he had to teach it to some of his Irish actors, and it was only then that they saw in the mournful drift and loose linking of his harmonies a new language behind language, subtly rich in

emotional import, like the melodies of the prose letters that people write in Shakespeare.

It may be, said Montague, with a side-glance at Pinero, that people do talk about "transactions occasionally spiced by a soiled flimsy from an adventurous *demi-mondaine*." And he went on, "If so, what much better English is spoken in Wicklow! How much purer, stronger, more vivid, less dilute, less tangled, less turbid with the loans of slang and semi-science from languages that they do not know!" Anybody picking up Mr Ward's anthology a hundred years hence will think that the dramatic critics of to-day had no ears for the new music.

Why, again, include of Clement Scott only that article, the one on Ibsen's *Ghosts*, which was to proclaim the first critic of his time the ass he was far from being? Scott was a first-class *dramatic reporter*, and should be judged by his reporting, of which no example is given. And why devote space to divagations about the Music Hall, a branch of the dramatic art which deserves a book to itself? Two articles are not enough, yet too many. Not enough, because we do not get Walkley's magnificent piece about Grock. Too many, because the space allotted to Sir Max Beerbohm is frittered away on a trivial essay about Dan Leno, when we could have had the so much more significant "Impressions of Henry Irving," with its superb ending:

To ignore Irving's cruelty is to ignore a very salient part of him. Which quality predominated in him—cruelty or kindness? He was an actor, and, even more obviously than most actors, he acted a great deal in private life. How far were both his kindness and his cruelty exaggerated for effect? And, again, how far was his early Bohemian self merged and lost in his later Pontifical self? Did he actually become, at last, what he wished to seem? The people who knew him best are the people least likely to enlighten us in these problems. His magnetism, even through the pavement of Westminster Abbey, is still too strong on them.

"Even through the pavement . . . magnetism. . . ." But if young playgoers won't learn, they won't.

Mr Ward's book means well, but does not do well enough. Not

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a word about the production in this country of the plays of Tchekhov, Obey, Jean-Jacques Bernard, Sean O'Casey, and no notice of any play by Mr Shaw later than *Arms and the Man*. Realizing that this book is a tale of criticism and not a history of the theatre, I still submit that what contemporary critics thought about *The Three Sisters*, *Noah*, *The Unquiet Spirit*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *St Joan* is of more importance than Ruskin's views on Christmas pantomime. That in an immense field subject-matter should count as much as prettiness of treatment. And on behalf of Mr MacCarthy, Mr Brown, and some of our younger spirits, I protest against the prefatorial statement that "The golden period of theatre criticism in England was the twenty-five years that ended in 1914." There is a lot of bright gilt about, and who knows that Time will not turn some of this into gold?

November 4, 1945

What the Dickens . . . !

MEET MR MICAWBER. By Edgar K. Bruce
Rudolf Steiner Hall

TO-MORROW WILL BE DIFFERENT. By Paschoal Carlos Magno
New Lindsey

THE proper study of mankind may conceivably be Micawber. But the proper study of Dickens's great novel must scan more than its central figure. It must take in the satellites as well as the sun. I am aware that Mr Edgar K. Bruce makes no greater claim for his play than that it is "based on certain chapters of the novel." But this won't do, for the reason that the playwright cannot have control over the spectator's imagination. Dickens's novel contains sixty-four chapters, Micawber appears in sixteen of them, and in this play in fewer than sixteen. Now not only is Dickens's whole greater than this immense part, but this immense part must use some of the whole before it can exist at all. Some asks for more, more asks for much more, and much more wants the lot. Imagine, if you can, this masterpiece shorn of its Creakles, Steerforths, Peggottys, Mrs Gummidge, Little Em'ly, Rosa Dartle, Julia Mills, Mrs Crupp of the nankeen bosom, Mr Murdstone, Mr Dick, Mr Littimer, and many more. Without any Barkis to be willing or unwilling. It is useless for the author to urge that he did not intend a version of *David Copperfield*. Argue as the playwright may, the spectator will insist that any setting for Micawber shall be a reasonable transcript of the novel.

And then how poorly, how inadequately, I regret to say, are the remaining characters enacted. A Betsey Trotwood who could not say boo! to a goose, let alone a donkey. Agnes Wickfield, that "apotheosis of the female prig and bore," now turns up as a blonde, fluttering about like any film nitwit. Contrariwise, Dora appears as a serious, wistful brunette like Janet Gaynor in something about Blue Heavens. (Dickens knew well enough that soulfulness calls for umbrageous hair and featherbrains for yellow curls.) The

Misses Spenlow are not old ladies, but charming young ones pretending to unaccustomed spectacles and cracked voices. David doesn't exist. (The actor may plead that he doesn't exist in the book.) Traddles is not allowed to talk of his "dearest girl." Mr Spenlow is a tall, imposing figure, instead of a little, stiff one, and no Jorkins looms. Mrs Micawber is a burlesque. She makes no allusion to her family, and where, oh where, are the brown kid gloves? The point, of course, is that to do justice to these immortal figures would require twenty of this country's finest character actors. And this venture is a little one.

The evening is saved by Mr Bruce's Micawber, who is the man himself, or as near as the stage is likely to get. Chesterton said that the thing about any figure of Dickens—Sam Weller, Dick Swiveller, Micawber, Bagstock, Trabb's boy—is that he cannot be exhausted. "A Dickens character hits you first on the nose and then in the waistcoat, and then in the eye and then in the waistcoat again, with the blinding rapidity of some battering engine." This is exactly what Mr Bruce does. The actor exuberates, and is not exhausted. We feel that when Micawber is not pervading the play he peregrinates in the metropolis and penetrates the arcana of the modern Babylon. He has the authentic roll in the voice. We wonder at him, as Chesterton wondered at him. Perhaps I wonder most when this master of the majestic period describes himself as riding a storm at sea, "tossed by the elephants, I mean elements." But let that pass, together with the too-visible join between the actor's brow and cranium. Here is a wonderful Micawber. And wondering, one almost forgives the play's lamentable ending with Dora showing herself in her wedding-dress, and Agnes, if she points at all, pointing downwards. "Sucks to her!" as a schoolboy who knew his Dickens was heard to observe as we came out.

Mr Paschoal Carlos Magno's play is all about miscegenation at Rio de Janeiro. What at where, does the reader ask? Put it that a nice, genteel, white girl marries a mulatto. What more charming picture than this couple dandling some amber piccaninny on its knees and telling it to look at the Carmen Mirandas and their beaux jitterbugging. Be a good ickle boy now and later on Juanito shall make pretty dances to pretty music. No. What might still be a

problem in the backyards of Cardiff or the front gardens of Kensington does not seem much of a poser to a playgoer alive to the growing impact of negro expression in another continent. And, alas, in our own. Mr Magno will not agree. He holds that a feckless pater-familias and his sloppy wife, a son who wants to be a dancer, another son who writes slush for the radio, and a seventeen-year-old who sets herself on fire because some casting director doesn't think she can act—Mr Magno holds that this odd crew is still capable of drawing the line at one of their number who falls in love with some noble savage's brown skin and untutored mind. I suspect that the author postulated an echo of a culture older than that actually presented. But that isn't all the play. There's a coal-black mammie. The song-writer thinks he has strangled his mistress. But he hasn't. He has merely given her a good shaking, whereupon she dies of heart disease. So he isn't a murderer after all. But perhaps the baby, when its mother retrieves it from the Foundling Hospital, will turn out not to be black enough to matter. My own view is that she will bribe the matron at the hospital to give her the whitest baby in stock, and so make it socially easier to bring it up to be "a man above any distinctions of class, religion, race, a man of the new world."

Miss Hermione Hannen presented the baby's mother as a young woman with views, and I had the two-fold impression that she would never have looked at a blackamoor husband, and that he, on his side, would have thought twice before taking that lily hand for keeps. Perhaps some day some more realistic playwright will refrain from killing off the originator of the problem in a motor accident, and show us that domestic hearth some ten years later with the husband, kicked out of the local dance band for being drunk, throwing the crockery at his wife ostracized by her own set, and telling his first-born that if he doesn't stop teasing his brothers and sisters he'll leather the pants off him.

November 18, 1945

Three Actresses

THE SACRED FLAME. (Revival.) By Somerset Maugham
St Martin's

UNDER THE COUNTER. By Arthur Macrae
Phoenix

THE truly wise young actress of to-day would insist on a clause in her contract whereby she should not be required in any circumstances to appear with Miss Mary Hinton. Why? Because here is one of the very few actresses left who can play a woman of breeding. Every age gets what it wants, including the things it does not want hard enough to prevent them. This one may or may not want the atom-bomb; time alone can tell. It is certain that what the modern theatregoer corrupted by the cinema desires to see on the stage is not ladies but "live bomb-shells." The screen has divided womanhood into two classes. The first is that grey-haired placid figure which, in some village doorway in Wisconsin, or wherever in America they have villages, strokes the brow of the gangster from the wars returning, whispers his o'er-fraught heart and bids it mend, ditto the six-inch gash on his crown, and reckons a cup of cawfee "will soon make everything all right, Son." The second class is the dedaubed and bedizened baggage who regards her home as something to pop into between beauty parlours or on the way to her night-club. Your gentleman, too, is demoded. Who can imagine Mr Darcy saying to Elizabeth Bennet, "What's on your mind, sister?"

There is about Miss Hinton a quietude, a morning placidity against which the most striking of theatrical stars must pale their uneffectual fire. Striking, I think, is the word for Miss Dresdel. She is on the stage and you cannot miss her. She is around and about. She has repose, but only in the sense in which a railway engine getting up steam can be said to have repose. She may pretend to be an iceberg, but it is an iceberg whose iridescence comes not from the pale-glinting sun but from some interior furnace

that the actress is obviously stoking up. In this play Miss Dresdel must present an icy young woman incapable of thaw, a professional nurse who holds that her love for her patient is spiritual, sublimatory, the kind of thing that vestals abjuring motherhood contrive to regard as maternal. Now Miss Dresdel may sit in a corner trying to look more black than ashbuds in the front of March; actually she sulks no more than a laburnum in the front of May. And then the explosion comes, the buds go off like pop-guns, and we get a brilliant and magnificently sustained piece of acting as an older day knew acting. Maugham has written a part full of raging rocks and shivering shocks, a part to make all split, wherefore on Thursday afternoon cat after cat walked on to the stage and was hurled dismembered into the wings. Very fine! And then Miss Hinton took the stage and it was like Outer Space telling worlds colliding in their silly little universes to make less noise. Rather like an oblatory Duse snubbing a tantrumesque Sarah.

Have readers forgotten what this play is about? Maurice Tabret, an aviator who has come unharmed through the first Great War, meets with an accident in trying-out a new 'plane, whereby he has for six years been a cripple confined to a wheel-chair. He is passionately devoted to his wife. But Stella Tabret has for him no more than an immense pity; she is, moreover, in love with Maurice's brother, Colin, by whom she is to have a child. And all the time Maurice's mother sits on her sofa scanning the lives about her with a penetration which her simplicity appears to deny. She decides that the proper thing to do in the circumstances is to give her crippled son an overdose of sleeping-stuff and so spare him the pain of his wife's infidelity. The sacred flame, then, is a five-branched candelabrum—Maurice's ineffectual desire, Stella's pity, her normal attraction towards Colin, Nurse Wayland's burning chastity, and the mother's all-embracing love. A powerful play, making the present revival something of an occasion.

"Tea," said the elder Fred Emney's Mrs Le Browning, "h'acts like poison on my system. I suppose you 'aven't a little drop of Madeira sherry wine." And, again, "Gas," said Dorothy Parker's Lily Wynton. "Gas. Nobody knows what I suffer from it." Asked how's for a spot of tea, the famous actress went on, "Tea—

I adore it. I worship it. But my distress turns it into gall and wormwood in me. Gall and wormwood. Let me have a little, tiny bit of your beautiful, beautiful brandy." At what point in *Under the Counter* will Miss Courtneidge's brilliantly burlesqued actress make these devastating confessions and heart-rending appeals? Mrs Le B. and Lily W. belong to two different worlds? But so, too, does this utterly delightful artist, who is at home equally in the open spaces of the music hall and the advantageous coigns of the intimate theatre.

Mr Macrae's play, being like-minded, contrives to move on two planes simultaneously, with complete success. At one moment we are watching one of our deffest performers, an adept in a deftness of her own invention, delicately threading a social maze which begins in Kensington, takes in Whitehall, and ends at Harringay. At the next, she is rioting about surrounded by a bevy of athletic young women, corybanting for all they are worth, and a little more than the star pretends she is worth. I suspicion, as they say in the films, some very close and careful collaboration. I suspicion an arrangement that the actress should pull the play apart and the author pull it together again, and that both should go on doing this interminably, say, for three and a half hours. This is perhaps a little long, and one would say much too long if it were not that the play is very, very witty, while Miss Courtneidge's guying is very, very diverting. I am persuaded that at some time during the preliminary pow-wows this impeccable artist went off into a swoon in the best Lily Wynton manner and murmured, "To act. To set one word beautifully beside another word. The privilege of it. The blessed, blessed joy of it." And that, turning to Mr Macrae, she then said, "Do you think we should bring the chorus on here?"

November 25, 1945

Show Business or Drama?

Is it the will of the British people that the drama should perish? The answer is No. It is common knowledge that never at any time in our history have the big cities, the small towns, the villages felt so keenly the need for Drama. Yet in London, by which is meant the West End, the drama is having the life choked out of it by the extraordinary, super-normal success of the business of entertainment. Let no word be said against the commercial syndicates who pursue an honourable trade to the complete satisfaction of a public in want of their wares. "The showman's laws, the showman's patrons give." There is no reason why the editor of a racing-paper should fill his columns with stuff suitable to a theological review. If the West End public wills that Edmund Kean's house become the home of Gargantuan twaddle, Irving's be turned into a dance-hall, and Tree's into a temple of frolic, if it wills that out of London's theatres, traditionally forty, fifteen should be devoted to musicals, eight to light comedies and whimses which may be lumped together under the title of "Slop at Shy Corner," four to revivals classical and neo-classical—so be it. If it be Shaftesbury Avenue's will that another four theatres should house the super-successful run, meaning anything from three to five years—so be that too. Thirty-one from forty leaves nine. Say that of these nine remaining theatres six are in the hands of managements hoping to replace the moderately popular draw by the inordinately successful one, managements which would not look at an intellectual play anyway—that too is O.K. by me. Take thirty-seven from forty and three remains. Take thirty-seven theatres from forty theatres and three theatres remain. Of which, let us say, two have been blitzed. Two from three leaves one. Yet that one has not managed to house Mr Priestley's new play, which has been given its first night in Moscow.

I find nothing wrong here, though I see a great deal that is missing. The commercial managements are as much entitled to

meet their customers' demands as any proprietor of multiple tea- or tobacco-shops. I should not approve of a law limiting the run of *Woogie Goes Boogie* any more than in another sphere I should approve of one limiting the number of performances of those Tschaikowsky and Rachmaninoff concertos. There is too much interference by everybody in everything. Let us clear our minds of cant. Let us acknowledge that the commercial managements are doing their job at least as well as the buses and tubes. (We do not hear of actors striking.) In return let the commercial managements realize that, like the tea-shops, tobacco-stores, bus and tube companies, they are doing nothing to elevate, *and are not concerned to elevate*, the public taste. That they are doing nothing for the living drama.

I just do not believe that the theatre can pass through the greatest of wars into the era of the atom without having something to say about it. It is too early to say what that something will be, but I feel it will not be entirely expressed, though it may be partly expressed, by the dramas of Sophocles and Shakespeare. Very little by Restoration comedy. And not at all by revivals, however beautifully dressed, of the Last of Mesdames Cheyney, Erlynne et Cie. The new drama may not have behind it the West End entertainment-seeker for whom the West End manager singly caters. It has behind it the will of the country as a whole. Johnson says somewhere, "About things on which the public thinks long it commonly attains to think right." Change "long" to "hard" and the trick, triumph, and obligation of furnishing this country with an art of drama as distinct from show business is accomplished. I hope next week to suggest how this may be brought about. Note that it is all of this scepter'd isle, this earth of majesty *except the capital* that is to be so furnished. It is only in the heart of London, in its famed West End, that the drama is condemned to petty doom and trivial damnation.

December 2, 1945

Réclame and Recall

There is a world elsewhere.

Coriolanus

LAST week's article postulated that in the West End of London the art of drama as distinct from the business of entertainment is either dead or at its last gasp. This week's article is to suggest how the London actor can help the new drama, very much alive, kicking, and even crowing in every part of Great Britain except the core of the capital. The advice I am to give is the simplest in the world. Nurse that new drama, and since infants cannot be nursed at a distance this means joining the Movement. I append a letter which I am prepared to send to any young actor ready to accept exile because (a) it is exile in a good cause and (b) he will starve if he doesn't.

YOUNG MAN,

The art of the player is a natural process in which the egg precedes the hen. One of the earliest of childhood's forms of self-expression is the urge to pretend. "Look, Mummy, I'm a horse!" The child wants to be a horse *before he has invented anything for that horse to do*. I hold that in the dawn of civilization men and women felt the urge to play at being somebody else before they invented anything for those somebody elses to do. In other words, that there were cave players before there was cave drama.

Let us skip a few aeons. You actors have the whip-hand to-day, though you do not know it. The drama stands in greater need of you than you of the drama. (I would rather hear a great actor recite the multiplication table than watch the village postman pretending to be Othello.) And since there are too many of you young players to squeeze into the capital I say to you, "Masters, spread yourselves." I realize what you must feel about this. Years ago Aubrey Beardsley wrote of

réclame and recall,

Paris and St Petersburg, Vienna and St James's Hall.

I agree that at the moment

réclame and recall,
Harris and the Kyles of Bute, Poplar and the People's Hall

is not quite the same thing, though there is no reason why we should not pretend that it may become so. I refuse to believe that when, under Hallé's bâton, Norman-Neruda put fiddle to chin and attacked that Mendelssohn concerto she said to herself, "This is only the Free Trade Hall." Or that Brema, giving a backward kick at three yards of blood-red velvet before, with Richter at the helm, launching out on to Wagnerian seas, ever thought, "This is only Manchester." Ditto for Joachim and Ysaye, Busoni and Backhaus. Try to make yourselves as good artists as these were. Let me tell you a little story. A young actor once said to me, "Gerald is terribly modest. I asked him whether it was right for me to be in the centre of the stage, and he said, 'Stay where you are, young man; I dare say I'll find a corner for myself somewhere.'" I said, "You young fool, don't you realize that wherever G. is on the stage becomes the centre of that stage?" The great or even near-great actor has the power to turn a town into a capital, and the poorest barn into the richest playhouse. Remember that many fine players, including Benson, Martin-Harvey, Fred Terry, and Matheson Lang, have been content to spend nine-tenths of their time in the provinces.

Permit me, my dear boy, a word on your behaviour in the wilderness. Keep yourself to yourself. Don't be on view except in the theatre. Walk to your lodging or take a cab. Don't be seen clutching an umbrella and scampering at the heels of last trams. Only once during the thirty-odd years I lived in Manchester did I see an actor off the stage. This was John Hare. Gone was the gay Lord Quex, and in his place was a little old man with bags under his eyes.

You will have difficulties to contend with, of course. You will have the theorists who hold that the professional actor is a mere exhibitionist. That the function of the drama is not the entertainment of others but to provide means for the individual to express himself. That true drama is village drama, and true acting com-

RÉCLAME AND RECALL

munity acting. That any play about, say, communal wash-houses is a good play if the author expresses what they, the theorists, hold to be the correct view of communal wash-houses. I say to you, suffer these cranks as well as you can and don't argue with them, since nothing confirms a man in his crankhood as much as reasoned opposition. You will find all sorts of movements on foot all humming around something known as a civic centre. Don't thwart or hamper these movements in any way. Remember that, in the language of the films, they may have got sumpen. Mention of the films suggests yet another reason why you should remain in splendid isolation. This is that wherever you act there will be a cinema over the way whose stars look down from the Hollywood firmament. How can you compete in glamour if your "fans"—I apologize for the word—gaze at you level-eyed? The theorists will tell you that glamour has no place in the theatre, and that in the new social consciousness playhouse and bakehouse rank equally. I give you leave at this point to say what I may not print.

Your reward? On the lowest plane London will send for you *if you are good enough*. You will get your réclame and recall. On the higher plane, and even if you are a poorish actor, you will have helped to keep alive that art of drama which, I repeat, has breathed its last in London's West End.

Faithfully,

JAMES AGATE

December 9, 1945

A Letter to a City Father

MOST POTENT, GRAVE AND REVEREND SIGNIOR,

You are shortly going to have thrust upon you, whether you like it or not, a civic theatre. I take it that you know little about stage players—the City Father who knew much would not get my vote—beyond some vague recollection of Irving in *The Bells*. Permit me to tell you, my very noble and approved good master, that theatrical folk are kittle cattle who would rather starve in the West End of London than go outside the three-mile radius. In a way I sympathize. As a journalist, I would sooner sweep the floor of “Everybody’s Potting-shed and Black Market Gardener,” published in Soho, than own, edit, and write nine-tenths of the most august of provincial organs. Your theatre, then, is going to have considerable difficulty in getting hold of worth-while actors and actresses, and I am to tell you that you won’t secure them merely by urging that a full stomach is to be preferred to an empty one. Better, they will tell you, a dinner of herbs where witty company is than a stalled ox and boredom therewith. (I personally don’t believe that a good thing can be said north of Willesden.) Wherefore you will have to try other methods.

One way of collecting good players is to persuade them that a civic theatre is a real theatre and not a converted schoolroom. If you didn’t see Irving in *The Bells* you probably saw Tree in *The Ballad Monger*. Let me remind you of his famous riddle, “When is a repertory theatre not a repertory theatre?” With the devastating answer, “When it’s a success.” Obviously I should be wasting my time—and I am not a time-waster—in writing this letter if I did not believe that a repertory theatre can be a success. But I warn you that to achieve this you must do that which Othello denied doing. You must use witchcraft. Remember the history of playgoing in this country, how it was an alternative to bear-baiting, bowls, dicing, gaming. How, like public executions, it was part of the excitement of life. How Puritan disapproval put

on it that seal of the illicit which persisted into my youth, so that while I was made from the age of seven to attend classical concerts as part of my education I was under the necessity, up to the age of twenty, of wheedling and cajoling my parents before I could get leave to go to the theatre.

The first thing, then, is to arrange that your playhouse retains for young people this atmosphere of the forbidden, and the only way to do this is to see that it doesn't put on educational airs. As far as the outside is concerned let your architect go Gothic, Palladian, Georgian, or anything that doesn't suggest a bungalow at Peacehaven or a sun-trap at Penge. Let whatever he puts up *look like a theatre*. Inside, let it *be* a theatre with boxes and a horse-shoe circle, and not one of those flat-chested compromises that is clamouring to be a cinema. Sumptuosify the place like an Edwardian hostess. Let there be gilt cornices and red velvet hangings, glittering candelabra and marble staircases. And why should the cinema over the road have all the best carpets? Tell your licensing committee: No bar, no theatre. Cultivate the snob value, have a restaurant attached, and insist that evening dress is compulsory, the head-waiter innocent of English, the napery of the whitest, and the dance-band of the blackest. There are more ways of catching an audience than by announcing "Jane Clegg in *The Trojan Women*." Then lift your curtain on the best plays acted by the finest players under the most capable producer you can put under contract.

Charles Lamb writes somewhere about "the playhouse atmosphere, the happy distortion of workaday values"—I quote from memory. Ponder whether the failure of one or two famous repertory theatres may not have been brought about by too-close adherence to workaday values. Ask yourself whether "Mrs Mudberry which kept a mangle, and Mrs Bunkin which clear-starched" go to the theatre to see other Mudberrys and Bunkins, mangles and dolly-tubs. Whether Pale Youths with plated watch-guards and Prim Men in cloth boots want dramas about income-tax wangers. Regrettably, if you like, people have always gone to the theatre to escape from the life they know to the life they don't know. Let that life be fittingly presented. Even your country

bumpkin is not so dumb as to be taken in by an Aubrey Tanqueray whose dress-shirt hasn't been laundered for three weeks and a Paula who obviously buys her clothes in Irlams-o'-th'-Height or Newton-le-Willows.

Balzac has a story about a Provençal who took himself to Paris for a holiday and in three weeks found himself ruined by the famous siren, Jenny Cadine. "*J'en ai eu pour mon argent*," said the simple fellow, whereupon the three Parisians who had arranged the joke handed him back his fortune. I remember an unsanctioned visit to Liverpool to see Sarah Bernhardt in the forbidden *La Dame aux Camélias*, and still smart at the parental reaction to that escapade. I had my lark's worth, and knew it. My final word is to urge you so to conduct your city's theatre that the youngsters who visit it snatch a fearful joy. To this end I suggest that you should seek out your city's most persistent idealist and loudest-bleating crank, note his advice, *and do the exact opposite*. I believe that as the result the name of the piece halloo'd by your civic centre to your reverberate suburbs will be something better than *H'ya, Toots!*

Forgive this round, unvarnished tale, and believe me when I say that I would do the state of your theatre some service.

JAMES AGATE

December 16, 1945

Our Duty to the Provincial Actor

No, dear reader. I promise that this series of articles on the politics of the theatre will *not* be prolonged into the New Year. One matter remains to be cleared up—what is owed by provincial managers and critics to the actor who renounces London. A young provincial actress writes:

How can one give anything that can reasonably be called polish to a performance at the rate of work demanded in a provincial repertory company? Take this week. In the daytime I am getting ready for Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, and it seems to me like effrontery or crass conceit to imagine that one can do this at one read-through, four half-day rehearsals, and one dress-rehearsal immediately prior to the first performance. Does anybody realize that while I am studying Hedda half my mind is given to Paula Tanqueray, this week's heroine, and that when, next week, I am supposed to be Hedda half of me will be wondering what to do with the third week's Madame Ranevsky? It is a vicious, heart-breaking circle which might be worth while if the London managers or critics came. But they don't.

Next, a young provincial actor sends me this:

Could you possibly help the young actor by giving publicity to his efforts in the provinces? His overwork, his low salary, his struggle to perfect a part in one week, his disappointment at having to leave a character half-evolved in the course of six nights and one matinée? The agony of acquiring the lines without the time to discover how to say them properly, the hell of destroyed illusions when, by some happy chance, he is successful in some rôle and two weeks later knows it to be forgotten by all but himself! The hopelessness of feeling that although he may be a big fish in a little pond, he is a fish whom neither managers nor critics come to see?

I agree that the repertory theatres are on a par with the old stock companies whose actors were expected to swallow a part in the morning, half-digest it, and, on the same evening, regurgitate as much of it as they could remember. ("What's the line?" telegraphed the old actor to the newly-engaged prompter, who telegraphed back, "What's the play?" An old story, but 'twill serve.) I look to the managers of the new civic theatres to put an end to this nonsense. It is all a matter of organization. I see no reason why company A should not play *A Doll's House* in, say, York, Hull, Doncaster, Sheffield, Leeds, Harrogate, and then come back to York with a fresh play. No reason why companies B, C, D, E, and F should not succeed the York company and each other with *Heartbreak House*, *The Moon in the Yellow River*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Trelawney of the Wells*, and *Eden End*. I see no reason why another six companies should not be doing the same thing for Lancashire, and so on throughout the Midlands, and the East, South, and West of England. Where there's a will there's a way. If the provinces want drama in the way they want Association football they will get it. If not, not.

The managers? Managers are a law unto themselves, and looking beyond one's nose has never been a strong point in theatrical policy. What managers want is not young talent but Names. What is going to happen when the Names become so decrepit that they have to be carried to and carted from the theatre on a stretcher does not occur to them. Nor, apparently, are they concerned with how young players are to become Names. Sufficient unto the Shaftesbury Avenue year are the profits thereof.

The critics? This brings me to the letter contributed by Mr Leonard L. Hicks to last week's *Sunday Times* in which he pertinently asked how the young actor who is good enough will be called to London if London never hears of his goodness? "Will the London dramatic critics go to the provinces?" The answer is: No, sir, they won't. They will remember that critic who, between the two wars, was pressed by his editor to make the journey to Barnes. He replied, "Sir, I respectfully submit that I am your dramatic critic for London, not for Asia Minor."

In my view provincial newspapers must match the new dramatic

spirit with a new critical spirit. It was all very well for Justice Shallow to mingle his talk of death and the Psalmist with the price of bullocks at Stamford Fair. That is no reason why dramatic criticism should be entrusted to young men who have spent the day recording the latest market prices and in the evening are sent indifferently to cover a boxing-match, a dog-race, a political meeting, a new play. The preface to *The Manchester Stage, 1880-1900*, contained this sentence: "The line was taken that a city such as Manchester could claim the application of the strictest standards, just as if it were London or Paris." And the volume itself is proof that those who applied those standards were possessed of the enthusiasm, scholarship, sensitivity, theatrical experience, and *flair* essential to such application. What has been done once can be done again. The provincial actor must be encouraged to feel that he is not just marking time. That in meriting the praise of another Arnold, Elton, Montague, Monkhouse, he is fulfilling himself.

To sum up. I believe that the drama of this country is in the hands of the people of this country. The chances of it winning out? Say fifty-fifty. I regard its prospects in the way that Claudius, King of Denmark, viewed his marriage with Gertrude, that is with one auspicious and one dropping eye.

December 23, 1945

No More o' That

And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.

Macbeth

MEANING, dear reader, that you thought your dramatic critic had done with the provincial actor. That, I am afraid, is where you went wrong. The promise was that the discussion of the P.A. and his difficulties would not be prolonged into the New Year. Nothing was said about the last Sunday in the Old Year.

I have received a letter which would give me a headache if the P.A. were really any affair of mine. Which he isn't, or won't be after I have finished this article. The writer of the letter informs me that he is one of 76,000 inhabitants of a flourishing North of England town. After which he goes on to complain that I am the wrong person to write about anything connected with the provincial drama since I obviously know nothing about the provinces. "You never visit them; as far as you know everything north of Finsbury Park may be a celluloid desert."

The late A. B. Walkley once wrote that "the need for logical symmetry, for strict form, in analysis will often have tempted the critic to assume these qualities in the play when they are not, in fact, there." This holds true in the case of letter- as well as play-writing. Both should be what Joe Gargery called "architectooralloral." My correspondent will perhaps permit me to straighten out his ideas a little. He tells me that in the whole of his county there are only eight theatres, and that apart from an occasional visit by Mr Tod Slaughter there are only two of those eight theatres at which one can see plays. One is leased to a repertory company whose playhouse is not really a theatre but a hall seating some three hundred and fifty people; the other houses another repertory company which confines itself to dramas of the *East Lynne* and

Maria Marten variety. My correspondent views with alarm any federation of repertory companies since any such federation would, in his view, imperceptibly but surely, in the long run, and in spite of passionate protestations that nothing of the kind was going to happen, turn into commercial combines exploiting repertory enthusiasm.

Then, on another subject, do I not realize that most City Fathers are Puritans to the very marrow of their being, who regard any theatre as something between the boudoir of the Scarlet Woman and the Gateway to Hell? I am to hear of towns in which dramatic licences have been granted by the Council on the express undertaking that there shall be no bar. My correspondent goes on to tell me of extraordinary things. That there are a great many artists of whom no London dramatic critic has ever heard and will never hear unless he goes a-visiting, artists who "prefer to remain their own masters and perform plays with some central core of guts, feeling and wisdom in them, starvation and prosperity being entirely secondary considerations." That there is a genuine demand for the work of such artists, the trouble being that they cannot get theatres owing to the bricks-and-mortar monopoly of the cinema and variety circuits. And here is his not very hopeful suggestion. "I suppose provincial variety circuits will continue to present their bawdy-tawdry revues, and the London stage follow up its present policy of be-tinselled, nonsensical musicals, as long as people are bored enough to go to them. What about a chain of State-owned repertory theatres, playing at cheap prices, and with large enough companies to guarantee adequately rehearsed productions, the control and policy being vested in a board of artists elected by the profession? But then, I suppose, being actors, they would spend most of their time quarrelling with the Civil Service and with one another."

Earlier on in the course of his threadless argument my unknown friend had this: "As any amateur gardener will tell you, things do not grow just exactly where you expect them." I understand. Sow phlox, and up come delphiniums. I realize that during the last four weeks I have been engaged in amateur gardening. Now let me change the metaphor. Who, in the halcyon past, has not seen in

the "Situations Vacant" column that urgent cry for a "strong, willing, Shropshire general, all-found and three kept"? And who has not noted in the neighbouring "Situations Wanted" column that heart-rending appeal for servitude of the strong, willing, Shropshire general, with the added inducements of cleanliness and activity? Alas, it would seem that the law which keeps the hemispheres in their places keeps mistress and maid apart. Never, I am told, have these twain met. When, five weeks ago, I sat down to write the first of these articles on theatrical politics it seemed to me that there must be a limit to the freakishness of elemental law. That on the one hand we had the West End theatre notoriously closed to budding talent whether in play-writing or play-acting. That on the other we had the provinces clamouring for the plays and actors the West End doesn't want. It seemed to me that somebody, sometime, somewhere, somehow, should bring these two together. Perhaps I was wrong. Anyhow, time will show. I shan't, as an amateur gardener, be greatly distressed if a Hamlet planted in Middlesbrough turns up as a Macbeth in Darlington.

In the meantime that white elephant, the national theatre, is in the air again. (Charming metaphor!) Meaning, as Mr Basil Dean has pointed out, "stately piles in Kensington or South London." And I permit myself to assert for the hundred and fiftieth time that if the people of London wanted a building of this sort in the way that they want the cricket grounds at Lord's and the Oval, the football grounds at Highbury and Tottenham, and dog-racing stadiums everywhere, they would have it. I just don't believe that a national theatre in London would be anything but still-born. Whereas I am convinced that the drama in the provinces is already a lusty, kicking, and crowing infant. And that all it wants now is a perambulator and somebody to push it around.

December 30, 1945

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